2021

Issues Facing Community-Based Social Workers When Providing Female Offenders with Reunification Services

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Abstract

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MSW, Grand Valley State University, 1992

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Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The goal with this action research project was to understand how community-based social workers (CBSWs) could address female offenders' and their children's needs while striving to reintegrate them into the community of Central Los Angeles County, California. Postrelease female offenders with children suffer from a variety of issues related to housing, employment, and personal childhood trauma. The trauma exacerbates the risk of revictimization and recidivism. CBSWs play a pivotal role in helping female offenders overcome barriers to successful reentry and reunify with their children. This study incorporated Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which provided a systems lens to this project. The design used was action research with a five-person focus group. The data were transcribed and sorted into units, which were further sorted into themes. The study answered the following research question: What are the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing female offenders with reunification services postrelease? The CBSW participants identified four major themes that female offenders encounter: problems meeting basic needs, histories of trauma, need for specialized training, and difficulty navigating complex issues. This study informs social work practice by illuminating the complex nature of female offenders and the need for specialized training. A key recommendation included the importance of CBSWs ability to access support services that can meet the female offenders' unique needs. Promoting positive social change can be accomplished by improving formerly incarcerated women's services, supporting their successful reentry into the community, and helping their children flourish.

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Dedication

This dedication is for all the mothers that have suffered incarceration in

institutions for non-violent and inconsequential crimes. The severity of their punishment

is not justified. Prison affects women and impacts their families and children, which held

no consideration during sentencing. Mothers and children suffered damage and the

destruction of families that no incarceration should warrant. To the many social workers

who continue to work so painstakingly hard to overcome these women's situations and

do what is in the 'best interests of the children.' Without their assistance, this work could

not be possible! Hopefully, this project will help initiate policies to affect social change.

Acknowledgments

First, I extend my deepest thanks to my team of professors - Dr. Pete Meagher, my Chairperson, Dr. Debora Rice, my URR, and Dr. Debra L. Wilson, my other dedicated committee member. This project would not have been possible without you. Dr. Meagher, your commitment and positive words spurred me on to greatness – believe it or not. Although I was regularly stopped by what you considered imperfections – I. Got. It. You have inspired me to think big but with a narrow focus. To my beautiful mother, who has gone on before me, and handsome father, I felt your guidance daily. I am forever indebted to both of you! To my siblings - all 10 of them - I love you, especially my two sisters. I immensely appreciated all the help you gave me. If I have missed anyone, I thank you and pray God's blessings on you. Finally, thank you to the participants of this study. Your answers to my questions provided the insight I needed!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

Within the last 35 years, the United States prison population increased immensely, with California prisons rising to the largest in the nation, second to Texas (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014). National public policies mandated changes in sentencing laws, which lead to the "war on drugs" in 1970 and resulted in the mass incarceration of mostly poor, unmarried, and racially ethnic men and women with children (Swavola et al., 2016). Previously, law enforcement officials considered female offenders on par with male offenders, especially those using illegal substances (Vigessa et al., 2016). Instead of addressing the reasons behind a woman's criminal history or economic disadvantage through community-based treatment or diversion programs, the criminal justice system pursued more punitive measures necessitating conviction and incarceration. In this action research project, the researcher sought to understand how community-based social workers (CBSWs) could address the needs of female offenders living in Central Los Angeles County, California who have children and who are seeking to reintegrate into the community.

Although women historically commit low-level drug offenses and nonviolent property crimes, the current female incarceration rate increased nearly eight times the rate in 1980 (The Sentencing Project, 2018). In California, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS, 2019) indicated that the prison population - one of 20 states with the most substantial increase - rose by 960 prisoners from 1980 to 2000. Although the current number of female offenders in California state prisons is approximately 6,000, the

imprisonment of African American women (171 per 100,000) is five times the rate of Caucasian women (30 per 100,000), Hispanic women (38 per 100,000), and other women (14 per 100,000) combined (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2017; Harris et al., 2019).

The County of Los Angeles, California is the most populous county in the state (Wikipedia, n.d.). As of 2018, more than 10 million people resided in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. As of June 2018, CDCR's "In-Custody Population by Major County of Commitment" demographics and census data revealed that Los Angeles (42,100 or 32.5%) is the city where most offenders commit their crimes (CDCR, 2017). The number of women primarily responsible for caring for young children and returning to Central Los Angeles, California after incarceration is unspecified; nonetheless, they require specialized services to facilitate a seamless reentry and achieve economic success in the community after reentry (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016).

According to Western and Smith (2018), postrelease female offenders with children suffer from economic insecurities related to employment, housing, and personal childhood trauma. The trauma exacerbates the risk of revictimization and recidivism and associated with mental health problems, reduced coping that leads to substance abuse issues, and interferes with the ability to parent or regain custody of children (Reardon, 2017; Swavola et al., 2016; Saxena et al., 2014). CBSWs play a pivotal role in helping female offenders overcome barriers to successful reentry and reunify with their children. Additionally, CBSWs become instrumental in providing targeted services to meet female

offenders' psychological needs and their children while helping with access to community resources to improve their financial status.

As most jails and prisons provide programs that rehabilitate women before release, more services are required to help them reintegrate and reunify with their children. The research asserted that reentry services should address the female offenders' complex needs and their children (see Reardon, 2017; Saxena et al., 2014). CBSWs have helped develop comprehensive services to support female offenders that benefitted their children during the reunification process (King, 2017; Saxena et al., 2014). As such, I explored the issues and challenges facing community-based social workers when providing female offenders with reunification services postrelease in Central Los Angeles, California.

Action research was the methodology used to help CBSWs in Central Los Angeles, California understand the issues and challenges facing released female offenders and their children. Stringer (2007) suggested using group interviews to help participants identify and explore problems based on their professional experiences. Allowing participants to explore their experiences revealed the many nuances about the phenomena of interest investigated (Stringer, 2007). The group interview process also provided rich, experiential data about the work involving CBSWs when providing services to released female offenders and their children in Central Los Angeles, California.

The study's implications for positive social change provided social workers with a better understanding of the treatment needs required by female offenders and their

children after release from prison. Different strategies were used by CBSWs help marginalized populations increase their capacity for success regardless of the problems they face and promote positive social change. Levenson (2017) asserted that positive social change happens with implementing new skills by service providers. For example, implementing evidence-based practices helped clients increase their abilities and strengths and identified and reduced personal growth barriers to create positive social change (Levenson, 2017). Moreover, this project resulted in positive social change when CBSWs in Central Los Angeles, California identified the barriers that impact female offenders and their children after release, as well as inform their practice approach and action steps when engaging this population.

This section of the paper included two sections: one encompassing Section 1: Foundation of the Study and subsection 1: Review of the Professional and Academic Literature, and Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection. The Foundation of the Study comprised the introduction, problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions, nature of the doctoral project, significance of the study, theoretical/conceptual framework, value and ethics, review of the literature, and summary. The Research Design and Data Collection included the introduction, research design, methodology, data analysis, ethical procedures, and summary. The final sections comprised Section 3: Presentation of the Findings and Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change. Presentation of the Findings consisted of data analysis techniques, validation procedures, findings, and summary. Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change comprised the application to professional

ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, implications for change, and summary.

Problem Statement

Female offenders released to local communities have multifaceted needs and face numerous barriers when accessing services (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). These women, often primary caregivers to young children before incarceration, required community and family support and economic resources to promote successful outcomes (AECF, 2016; Swavola et al., 2016; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009). Unfortunately, the limited access to sustainable resources decreases the likelihood of female offenders maintaining adequate living conditions and caring for their young. Concerning the many obstacles affecting ex-female offenders released to Central Los Angeles, California, CBSWs played a pivotal role in understanding the intersections between these populations' many needs (Reardon, 2017). In this action research project, I explored the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing reunification services to released female offenders with children in Central Los County, California.

Most female offenders suffer traumatic histories that form the basis for their criminal activity and decreasing their coping skills (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Saxena et al., 2014). In the aftermath of the abuse and criminal justice involvement, female offenders faced added struggles such as poverty, unemployment, significant physical or behavioral health struggles, mental illness, and substance use, which cause more dysfunction in her life (Saxena et al., 2014; Swavola et al., 2016). The female offender's inability to achieve economic stability and care for young children intensified their barriers after release

(Brown & Bloom, 2009; Hall et al., 2016). With the implementation of punitive

postincarceration policies, the obstacles increase released women to a life of failure and

return to prison (Buell, 2014; Hall et al., 2016). In the current study, a qualitative

approach using a focus group interview with CBSWs was used to explore their

viewpoints and experiences about the research problem's scope to determine the reentry

challenges facing ex-female offenders released to Central Los Angeles, California.

Nationally, the number of people in U.S. jails and prisons in the past four decades

increased nearly five-fold in the United States, from 157,000 in 1970 to approximately

1.5 million prisoners at the end of 2017 (BJS, 2019; Swavola et al., 2016). The increase

in women's arrests comprised roughly 7% of the total inmate population at the end of

2017 (BJS, 2019). Jails and prisons warehoused impoverished individuals lacking the

financial means to afford bail for release (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). With more than 11

million annual admissions, jails and prisons housed those individuals that comprised the

mass incarceration epidemic (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). The increasing prison population

garnered new attention from legislators and the public, necessitating the need for more

community-based programs and services to anticipate the release of offenders (Swavola

et al., 2016).

The problem's local scope began with the CDCR and ends with service provision

by community-based social workers. The female offender population increased from

1,300 in 1980 to over 11,000 by 2006 (Strickman, 2017). The massive influx of female

offenders required reforms in California's criminal justice system, resulting in the

creation of legislation to implement a prison realignment plan in 2006. The Prison

Realignment Act of 2011 reduced the burgeoning prison population by 137.5% of the total capacity through early releases to community-based programs (Strickman, 2017). Although initially abundant, reentry programs eventually decreased in number but served the purpose of addressing the pathway issues triggering the influx of female offenders into California's prison system. With a current population of approximately 6,000 female offenders slated for release from state prison, CBSWs in Central Los Angeles, California require expert skills to meet the unique needs of reentering women with the added goal of helping them regain custody of their children.

According to the CDCR's (2017) demographics and census data, 70% of the 6,000 incarcerated females housed in California's four state institutions consist of racially ethnic women. An analysis of the CDCR's statistics by race and ethnicity illustrate that Hispanic (2,035), African American (1,515), Caucasian (1,860), and other ethnicities (i.e., American Indian, Asian, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander [439]) comprised the total female population (p. 26). The CDCR's demographics and census data for the male and female offender populations, based on county of commitment, revealed Los Angeles County felons (42,689 or 32.8%) commit the most crimes in the state (p. 13). Unfortunately, the CDCR's population data does not breakdown the number of incarcerated females sent to prison from each county. The number of female offenders committing crimes in Central Los Angeles and imprisoned in California state prisons justified the need for developed reentry services to address the myriad issues underlying their criminal pathways.

Previous studies suggested that social workers view specific practice strategies as critical for helping parents achieve successful reentry and reunification (Jedwab et al., 2018; Reardon, 2017). The research suggested that community-based services fail to address the traumatic experiences endured by justice-involved women due to the lack of trained service providers or scarce programs and services (Swavola et al., 2016). Improving outcomes for ex-female offenders, however, requires an understanding by service providers of the female offender's specific needs. For example, histories of childhood trauma informed the social worker's approach when helping female offenders decrease the negative aspects of their criminal behavior and pursuing family reunification with their children (King, 2017). Also, the implementation of gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment by CBSWs shaped the basis for effective treatment designed to address the women's multiple needs and engender an environment that reflects an understanding of their lived experiences (Saxena et al., 2014).

CBSWs also weighed the importance of forming collaborative relationships with released female offenders to facilitate successful reunification. In California, approximately 80% of the female offender population comprises single mothers (Swavola et al., 2016). During incarceration, child welfare laws and criminal justice practices limited visitation and hampered the bonding process, reducing successful reunification outcomes for incarcerated mothers and their children. The pressure to reestablish a relationship with and regain custody of minor children while searching for economic reentry assistance intensifies reunification and reentry efforts for women (Reardon, 2017). Moreover, parole terms mandated female offenders to return to their county-of-

commitment, where scarce reentry services exist. Current research underscored the need for specialized programs and services offered by trained service providers to address and counter the prevailing barriers confronting released justice-involved women (AECF, 2016; Covington, 2008; King, 2017; Saxena et al., 2014).

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The phenomena of interest explored in this study encompass the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing ex-female offenders in Central Los Angeles, California with the family reunification process. However, recognizing the numerous obstacles associated with reentry is incumbent upon the providers delivering community-based services to female offenders. Kjellstrand (2018) suggested that community-level interventions for female offenders included various services and a coordinated system of care to address their psychological, economic, and family connections. Although a multifaceted support system enabled optimal reintegration, service provision became unsustainable without skilled service providers (Reardon, 2017).

The practice-focused research question of this study is "What are the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing family reunification services to female offenders (with children) postrelease in Central Los Angeles, California?" The literature revealed gaps relative to whether community-based service providers acknowledged the need for and provided specialized treatment to ex-female offenders with children (see AECF, 2016; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Garcia & Ritter, 2012; Hall et al., 2016). The variables included the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing reunification services to female offenders with children post-release in Central

Los Angeles, California. The concepts consisted of economic support, including access

services (housing, employment, mental health and education services, and substance

abuse services), comprehensive gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment

services, and social work knowledge and training.

Definitions

The following definitions included the key terms, concepts, and constructs of the

current study:

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): The harmful experiences of children

while living with individuals who commit crimes, abuse substances, or suffer from

mental illnesses (Covington, 2008; Luther, 2016).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Development Theory: An effective developmental

ecological model for examining the effects of a parent's incarceration on a child's

socialization and behavior associated with attachment theory. In general, ecological

models emphasize the significance of numerous interrelated social perspectives

contributing to personality development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Ferdoos & Hafeez,

2017).

Children of incarcerated parents (CIPs): Minors with an imprisoned parent in the

county jail, state, or federal prison (AECF, 2016).

Community social worker: Community social workers manage community

programs and helped clients obtain resources, and work for nonprofits, grassroots

organizations, or government agencies to provide vital resources for the community.

Social workers in this specialty with a master's degree provide clinical services or manage programs (Types of Social workers, n.d.).

Family reunification: The process of returning children placed in temporary out-of-home care to their birth families and considered the preferred permanency plan for children in care. Timely reunification occurs within 12 months from the date of entry into out-of-home care and without increasing reentry (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Jedwab et al., 2018).

Female offenders/inmates and justice-involved women: Women in the criminal justice system accused or convicted of crimes, also called incarcerated individuals (Covington, 2008; CWIG, 2017).

Gender-responsive treatment (GRT): Treatment that acknowledges women's abuse histories and the central role that abuse played in developing substance use disorders and criminal activity. The GRT approach aids women's recovery leads to psychological well-being and a higher functioning level for female offenders through growth-fostering relationships (Saxena et al., 2014).

Mass incarceration: Prison population growth attributed to a policy shift in the war on drugs; the criminal justice system viewed substance-addicted individuals as criminals punishable rather than those provided with medical or drug treatment. As a result, the United States prison population increased by over 700% since the 1970s (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014; Manning, 2011).

Master's in Social Worker (MSW): Individuals who have completed a CSWE accredited program and became employed as caseworkers/managers, clinicians, and therapists (Types of social workers, n.d.).

Reentry programs and services: Programs that facilitated the safe return of ex-offenders to live as law-abiding citizens in the community, provide employment or housing services, consisted of prison and community-based services and designed to reduce recidivism, improve housing and employability, and increase community support depending upon the specific program goals (Patterson, 2013).

Trauma-informed care (TIC) and treatment: The provision of trauma-informed healing strategies by trained providers, who recognized the effects of trauma, respect privacy, and maximized the choices a woman makes to promote healing (Covington, 2008; King, 2017).

I explored the current issues and challenges facing community-based social workers when providing ex-female offenders with family reunification services postrelease. The increased knowledge and new strategies developed for this population by CBSWs in Central Los Angeles County, California, helped these women avoid re-entry into the criminal justice system and reunify with their children postrelease.

With the information gained from this study, I sought to clarify and enhance understanding of ex-female offenders by the social work profession engaged in providing reunification services to released female offenders. Although current information existed on female offenders, this study involved attention from national and state prison reform policymakers relative to improving re-entry services for released female offenders with

children. This study also encouraged community-based social work administrators to offer enhanced training to social work practitioners in the field, which improved the practitioner's body of knowledge. Furthermore, this study resulted in an original contribution to the field by enhancing social work practice with a marginalized population by aiding in the development of specific interventions that serve to lessen reentry obstacles.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

This study consisted of an action research design, employing a qualitative component of a focus group. Action research methodology offers a setting for participant stakeholders to discuss a common issue or everyday concern needing a solution (Stringer, 2007). Stringer (2007) indicated that action research begins with an all-encompassing question, problem, or issue. A focus group provided more clarity about the social work issue and useful perspectives from participant stakeholders regarding their experiences with the problem and its overall impact on the target population (Stringer, 2007).

Action research provided a valuable means of finding something otherwise unknown (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Whether discovered or a new creation, the information learned from the research made a claim to new knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). In this study, I discovered new information or creative interventions from the CBSWs who engaged released female offenders. Action research supported the prospect of finding original claims to knowledge about a phenomenon of interest.

Stringer (2007) emphasized that community-based action research recognizes the possibility of many outcomes when engaging in a collaborative process. In this study,

action research methods illuminated the factors that interfere with successful reintegration and family reunification for ex-female offenders in Central Los Angeles, California. CBSWs became more aware of the barriers to reentry and developed best practices that reduce successful reunification obstacles.

This study involved a collaborative process involving CBSWs working in Central Los Angeles, California and who have experience providing family reunification services to formerly incarcerated women. During a focus group interview, the CBSWs discussed the nature and extent of the problem and how to mitigate the problem by developing practical solutions. Five to ten CBSWs, employed by various community-based agencies providing services to female offenders in Central Los Angeles, California, comprised the research participants. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2010), using a small group of individuals in focus group interviews is sufficient to resolve a localized problem. Recruitment of the research participants involved purposive sampling techniques - a nonprobability sample involving professionals familiar with a particular topic (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010) - within social media and professional networks.

Through a review of the list of available names of focus group participants gathered through the purposive sampling process, the chosen CBSWs have worked in family reunification providing services to female offenders and their children (children of incarcerated parents [CIPs]) in the child welfare system or a contract community-based child placement agencies (foster family agencies, group homes, residential treatment facilities, and juvenile hall), as indicated by their job title (i.e., children's social worker, caseworkers/managers, clinicians, or therapist). Through participation in this study,

CBSWs (a) determined best practices involving the provision of reunification services to ex-female offenders, (b) developed awareness of the reentry barriers impacting female offenders, and (c) decided whether the issue warrants further training of CBSWs to enhance service provision.

I developed a list of focus group questions (See Appendix) for the CBSWs regarding the potential issues and challenges faced by CBSWs when providing ex-female offenders with reunification postrelease. Early distribution of the questions, emailed to each participant before convening the focus group interview, allowed ample time for the CBSWs to prepare and reflect on the subject matter. I recorded the focus group interview with a digital recording device and collected field notes for later analysis and transcription.

Stringer (2007) referred to rigor in action research to implement measures to ensure trustworthiness. The researcher proves the study's truthfulness by conducting extensive checks to establish credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The methods to support the trustworthiness of a study will be detailed in a later section.

Significance of the Study

The social work profession required an array of scientific evidence to support the effectiveness of evidence-based interventions (Teater, 2017). New knowledge acquired through research conducted by social workers paves the way for creative interventions that address challenging client problems. Although current information existed on female offenders, this study advanced the current social work practice knowledge by drawing attention to a national situation involving the mass incarceration of female offenders (see

Swavola et al., 2016). This study also advanced social work practice knowledge regarding a marginalized population and the type of services needed to promote their emotional and economic well-being upon release from prison. This study clarified and enhanced the social work professional's understanding of best practice approaches when assisting ex-female offenders when navigating the reunification process with their children.

This study holds significance for the field of social work in all aspects of practice, research, and policy. This study also provides pertinent information about a marginalized population of offenders and the impact of incarceration on them and their children. As the inability to cope with the aftermath of trauma became more problematic for these women, so has the need to create more evidence-based interventions, conduct research, and formulate policy to resolve the problem.

Many studies examined the impact of incarceration on parents and children but failed to provide services to facilitate reunification after reentry. I sought to underscore ineffective treatment approaches for social workers and encourage policy changes in local and national agencies that improve aspects of reentry and reunification services. This study also served to expose social work practitioners to a diverse experience involving trauma from the perspective of justice-involved women and their children and provided helpful insights about improving service delivery to these populations.

This study offered several suggestions for positive social change encompassing prison reform for justice-involved women, re-entry services, and the social world field. First, the study highlighted the impact of outdated policies relative to female offenders,

necessitating the implementation of innovation prison reform policies, revamped child welfare policies, and the development of specialized services and treatment protocols by community-based providers (Buell, 2014; Swavola et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2008). Likewise, policy changes required the allocation of funding for community resources, programs, and services (i.e., employment, housing, and medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment) essential for improving the economic and psychological wellbeing of female offenders, as well as supporting reunification effort (Chambers et al., 2018). Second, this study has implications for positive social change for CBSWs who, through the process of acquiring new knowledge about female offenders, may develop empathy and an appreciation of their plight and strive to offer individualized treatment interventions that improve the trajectory of justice-involved women and their children.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory guided the practice approach of human services professionals relative to understanding the intersection between an individual's environmental influences and personality development. Individuals exist within a multilevel social system comprised of an ecological environment - a nested arrangement of structures - including the micro-, eco-, exo-, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The microsystem, in particular, described the immediate institutions and groups that directly impact the individual's beliefs and behavior based on family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peer relationships. In this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system offered a predicate for conceptualizing how positive and negative transactional relationships influence behavior.

Second, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) theory described how early harmful experiences lead form maladaptive behaviors depending on contact with others. Interactions in positive environmental settings foster productive and stable lifestyles, whereas negative experiences involving abuse and dysfunction result in adverse outcomes. Female offenders often experience abuse and violence as children that persist into adulthood and often entangles them in unlawful activity. Individuals raised in dysfunctional homes (direct interaction with the nuclear family) and unsafe neighborhoods (community) often fall victim to the influence of crime (society) (Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Levenson (2017) offered a compelling rationale about Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory correlated to individual behavior and personality development to early environmental influences. Whether the individual presented with a perfect or flawed personality, they learned behaviors modeled from the transactional relationships experienced in their social environment. Ferdoos and Hafeez (2017), borrowing from Bronfenbrenner, asserted that children, for example, manifested maladaptive behaviors learned in social settings. However, behavioral changes required an awareness of the various systemic influences on personality and behavior development (Levenson, 2017). For this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provided an applicable foundation for understanding positive and negative behavioral expressions from an environmental viewpoint.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) theory offered insight into the growing human organism and the changing environments in which it thrives and grows throughout an individual's

life span. Acknowledging the contribution of a person's social environment is critical for social workers engaging all clients. Bronfenbrenner's theory aligned the problem statement of this study, as it informed the research participants about the impact of childhood adversity on female offenders' adult behaviors. Levenson (2017) suggested that social workers who become familiar with the pervasiveness of misfortunes during childhood that affect current problems become more capable of delivering targeted treatment. Bronfenbrenner's multilevel social-system framework also supported the research question and purpose of the study, as using its principles during a focus group generated a thoughtful discussion about the issues and challenges related to the type of reentry services that best meet the needs of released female offenders in Los Angeles County, California.

Values and Ethics

Values and Principles of the NASW Code of Ethics

Social work professionals strive to consider individual and societal well-being in a social context regardless of the type of services performed. The core social work values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence informed the broader principles that all social workers aspire (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). The following section explored the social work values and principles linked to the clinical social work problem regarding the following study.

Social Justice

Social workers pursue social justice on behalf of disenfranchised populations to ensure equal access to services and programs (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). One goal of social justice is protecting clients from discriminatory actions based on personal traits and cultural and ethnic differences. Social justice advocates engaged in meaningful activities on behalf of marginalized groups by challenging the status quo, resulting in needed improvements in the overall health and safety of those individuals (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). I sought to partner with social work practitioners striving to protect the parental and custodial rights of predominantly racially diverse female offenders as they navigate the reunification process after prison release.

Dignity and Worth of the Person

Social workers value individual differences in client populations aligned with the pursuit of social justice (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). The inability of social workers to value personal preferences and choices results in futile client engagement and advocacy (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Working with ex-female offenders in the community required attention to and awareness of their special treatment needs. The current study examined the potential issues and barriers facing social workers during the provision of gender-responsive services to ex-female offenders when seeking reunification with their children. Providing an orientation to the focus group participants about the lived experiences of female

offenders improved awareness and served to humanize the women as part of the larger society (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017).

Integrity and Competence

Central to the principles and values in the NASW's Code of Ethics is the social worker's understanding of the connection between people. Competent social workers seek to develop trust within therapeutic partnerships to strengthen the client's resolve and enhance overall well-being (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Trust sets when clients recognize the social worker's reliability quotient as demonstrated through practice with the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards in mind (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). The NASW's core values of integrity and competence epitomize the principles embodied by the CBSWs chosen for the current study and offered considerable guidance toward resolving the research problem.

NASW Guides Clinical Social Work Practice

The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) ethical standards guide the social worker's responsibilities to clients, colleagues, practice settings, the social work profession, and the broader society by informing their professional conduct. The Code includes all social work practitioners, regardless of their professional functions, work settings, or the populations served. Social workers acknowledged that all clients, as well as ex-female offenders, judged their professional and ethical demeanor during the provision of services. Social workers providing reunification services to female offenders understand

their responsibility to work within their scope of practice by obtaining the necessary skills and training to ensure competent service delivery.

How Study Supports the Values and Principles of the NASW

In compliance with the ethical obligations underlying this study participant stakeholders and I exemplified professional conduct as mandated by the NASW Code of Ethics. I sought to support the values and principles contained in the Code by reminding the CBSWs of its relevance during the research process. I also supported the values and principles contained in the Code by helping the CBSWs strive to make responsible choices within a moral community and with specific client populations (see National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Improving awareness of the issues influencing professional behavior comprises one way for social workers to exemplify the core values of the profession's Code of Ethics, whether student or practitioner and regardless of the professional's function, work setting, or the population served (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017).

In the next section of this paper - Review of the Professional and Academic Literature – I examined the relevant literature related to the social work practice problem, justification for the selection of the databases, search engines used, key terms, years searched, and the types of literature and sources searched. Additionally, the literature review summarized best practices, identified strengths, weaknesses, and the remaining gaps or unexplained areas related to the social work practice problem.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Released female offenders create myriad challenges for CBSWs, families, communities, and our society as a whole (Chambers et al., 2018). Female offenders present with specific treatment needs that impact their ability to successfully reintegrate into society after incarceration (Saxena et al., 2014). Research asserted the provision of gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment to address the specific needs of female offenders and facilitate posttraumatic growth (King, 2017; Levenson, 2017). Likewise, CBSWs may be well-suited to provide such treatment to female offenders to enhance coping and increase their capacity for managing the additional challenges upon returning to central Los Angeles County, California.

I used this literature review to define, explore, and analyze best practices involving gender-responsive strategies and trauma-informed treatment for female offenders. Likewise, this literature review examined best strategies that support CBSWs in developing effective interventions for ex-female offenders and addressed the negative impact of trauma as they resume parenting roles of their children after release from prison. Furthermore, I reviewed the literature relative to the role of CBSWs when offering gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment and how it influences successful reentry outcomes of female offenders.

For this literature review, I searched several databases and countless articles concentrating on justice-involved women and children, prison nurseries, and reentry and reunification programs, both locally and nationally, and the skills required by social workers providing reentry services in jails, prisons, and the community to initially

conceptualize the problem, and then determine gaps in the research. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, synonymous terms include "ex-female offenders," "incarcerated parents," "inmate mothers," "female inmates," and "justice-involved women."

The literature review began in August 2018 and continued until approximately early November 2018. I searched the following electronic databases to obtain relevant information about my proposed topic: SocINDEX, EBSCO (Academic, Search Premier), EBSCOhost, ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis at Walden University, PsycINFO, PsycBOOKS, PsycARTICLES, Criminal Justice Periodicals, Google Scholar, social work and psychology websites (i.e., Social Work Today, Psychology Today), and federal and state government websites to obtain data and trends about female offender reentry and children impacted by parental incarceration. Key search terms included *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) survey*, *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Development Theory, children of incarcerated parents (CIPs), family reunification, female offenders and female inmates, incarcerated females, incarcerated mothers and incarcerated women, inmate mothers, gender-responsive treatment, mass incarceration, reentry programs and services,* and *trauma-informed care and treatment*.

Prevalence

Mass Incarceration Impacting Females

Over the past 40 years, the number of imprisoned individuals increased significantly (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014). Allen (2018) asserted that the number of individuals incarcerated in either prison or jail rose nearly 700% between 1980 and 2000,

with the majority of prisoners committing drug-related offenses. For example, in 1980, more than 300,000 men and women were incarcerated; however, by 2011, their numbers reached 1,504,150 (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014). As a result of the prison population growth, a policy shift contributed to the "war on drugs." The policy shift signified that this war viewed substance addictions as criminal, thereby subjecting dependent drug users to punishment instead of treatment (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014).

As the "war-on-drugs," declared by President Reagan, turned its focus on punishing criminals through incarceration, women increased their use of illicit substances and became the chief recipients of prison growth (Haney, 2013; McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014). McDonald and Arlinghaus (2014) reported that the total number of women impacted by the new drug laws and incarcerated in federal and state prisons surged between 1980 and 2011, from 13,258 to 111,387. Consequently, sentencing laws and policy shifts - not crime rates - triggered a dramatic rise in the number of incarcerated female drug offenders (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014). The upsurge in U.S. prison populations described the phenomena as mass incarceration (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014).

The U.S. is the world's leader in mass incarceration, with 2.2 million people currently housed in the nation's prisons and jails - a 500% increase over the last 40 years (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014; TSP, 2017). Accordingly, the impact of mass incarceration led to a rise in the number of racially ethnic female offenders by 650% - a contrast to the 300% increase of racially ethnic male offenders (Haney, 2013). For instance, African American and Hispanic women, mostly disadvantaged by the new

criminal drug abuse policies, became targets of mass incarceration as they lacked the requisite coping skills to counter the pitfalls of substance abuse brought about by economically and mentally stressful situations (Covington, 2008; McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014; Murphey & Cooper, 2015). As such, only 5% of the world's female population lives in the United States, but the United States accounts for nearly 30% of the world's incarcerated women (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014). Hence, the number of women in U.S. prisons doubled in comparison to the rate of men since 1980, and more than 60% of the individuals incarcerated today are ethnic minorities (TSP, 2017).

Similarly, the number of women in jails increased from under 8,000 to nearly 110,000 between 1970 and 2014 (Swavola et al., 2016). However, in small county jails, the number of female inmates increased 31-fold from approximately 1,700 to 51,600 during the same period (Swavola et al., 2016). Recent nationwide data, tracking both gender and race, suggests that two-thirds of women in jail are ethnic minorities - 44% African American, 15% Hispanic, and 5% other, as compared to the one third or 36% nonracially ethnic or Caucasian women (Swavola et al., 2016).

The mass imprisonment of women caused countless children to suffer and disrupted seemingly stable family units (Swavola et al., 2016). Research asserted that single mothers usually served as primary caregivers to young children before incarceration and often comprise roughly 80% of the incarcerated female offender population in the United States (Barrick et al., 2014; Murphey & Cooper, 2015; Swavola et al., 2016). The research suggested that racially ethnic families consisting of young, single, and uneducated justice-involved mothers with under-aged children often live

below the poverty line (AECF, 2016). Most of these women commit low-level property and drug offenses, despite having less extensive criminal histories than their male counterparts (Swavola et al., 2016). Hence, ethnically diverse and poor women comprised their children to suffer when they go to prison.

Understanding the degree to which parental incarceration affects a particular child depends on the strengths and needs of the child, family unit, and community. The specific details of the parent's incarceration history, such as pre- and postincarceration functioning, length of sentence, nature of parent-child prison visits, and the level of disruption in caregiving relationships and family circumstances, contribute to the negative impact of imprisonment on minority children (Kjellstrand, 2017). Research established the need for correctional systems to continue reducing female jail and prison populations in the United States to protect the emotional and physical wellbeing of children (Swavola et al., 2016). Therefore, the need to get women out of prison and stabilize their children is a main priority.

California's Female Prison Population

Strickman (2017) reported that the phenomena of mass incarceration resulted in significant prison building activity in the United States. The CDCR, in particular, built and opened 21 new prisons between 1980 and 2005, thereby accommodating their growing prison population (Strickman, 2017). In 2006, CDCR housed upwards of 172,000 prisoners; approximately 12,000 comprised 10% of the female offenders in the United States (Haney, 2013; Strickman, 2017). As a result, California's densely

populated penal institutions regularly operated over designed capacity (Haney, 2013; Strickman, 2017).

Haney (2013) reported that pressure from the U.S. Supreme Court forced California to reduce overcrowding and improve prison conditions. The creation of California's Public Safety Realignment Act of 2011 set out to counter the rising prison population. The impetus behind prison realignment upheld the idea that each county held responsibility for nonviolent and nonserious felons, primarily consisting of female offenders (Haney, 2013; Strickman, 2017). Instead of sentencing offenders to state prison, the county jails maintain control and custody of adjudicated inmates where they remained to serve their sentences. The Act also reduced the rate of imprisonment of individuals engaging in criminal activity to the 18th lowest in the country, revealing a decreased ratio of 331 per 100,000 people sentenced to a year or more. Subsequently, the total state prison population fell to 130,390 (i.e., 124,487 male and 5,903 female) offenders (Carson, 2016; Strickman, 2017).

As of December 2017, the CDCR (2017) reported further reductions in its prison population to 119,534 male and 5,779 female inmates, totaling 125,313). The Public Safety Realignment Act satisfied the U.S. Supreme Court's prison reform mandate for defining the type of crimes eligible for state prison and county jail sentences (Haney, 2013). Accordingly, realignment led to prison reform by way of early releases for female offenders committing nonserious and nonviolent offenses. The realignment act mandated reductions in the state prison female inmate population, resulting in changes in sentencing requirements that either allowed offenders to (a) serve lower term sentences in

county jails or (b) apply for early release from prison via the Alternative Sentencing

Program (ACP) upon transfer (CDCR, 2017; Haney, 2013; Swavola et al., 2016).

Therefore, the passage of the Act resulted in positive prison reform outcomes directly

impacting California's female population.

Arrests and detention of California's female offenders occur in one of the state's

58 counties. According to the CDCR (2017), California's four female institutions house

offenders as follows:

1. Central California Women's Facility (2533)

2. California Institution for Women (1879)

3. Female Community Reentry Facility (300)

4. Folsom Women's Facility (405)

CDCR's "In-Custody Population By Major County of Commitment" demographics and

census data revealed that most offenders commit their crimes in one of the five larger

counties - Los Angeles (42,689 or 32.8%), Riverside (9,899 or 7.6), San Diego (8,837 or

6.5), San Bernardino (8,076 or 6.2%), and Orange (6,555 or 5.0%; CDCR, 2017, p. 13).

Likewise, CDCR's (2017) demographics and census data comprising the "In-

Custody Female Population" and broken down by race and ethnicity indicate that

Hispanic females (2,035) constitute the largest ethnic population, while African

American females (1,515) make up the second-largest ethnic population (p. 26).

Caucasian (1,860) and others (i.e., American Indian, Asian, and Hawaiian/Pacific

Islander [439]) comprise the remaining racial and ethnic group breakdown of the "In-

Custody Female Population" (CDCR, 2017, p. 26). Hence, CDCR's ethnic female

offender population represents 70% of the in-custody female population (CDCR, 2017, p. 26).

Despite the commission of nonviolent drug offenses and property-related crimes, women residing in California continue to risk incarceration (CDCR, 2017; Haney, 2013; Sanders, 2016). Saxena et al. (2014) argued that female offenders exposed to past trauma experience higher rates of substance use disorders and drug dependence than male offenders and 10 times higher than women in the general population. Reardon (2017) and Swavola et al. (2016) suggested that female offenders experience more intimate partner violence (IPV), thereby increasing their risk of revictimization, incarceration, and recidivism after release from jail or prison. Furthermore, research stressed the connection between trauma and mental health problems leading to poor coping skills and substance abuse (citation). As such, female offenders with histories of trauma continuously flow in and out of California's prisons, notwithstanding the type of crime committed.

Strickman (2017) confirmed the tendency of penal systems to combine motherhood and punishment in ways that produce negative ideas about gender, race, and class. Adverse practices employed by correctional systems impact marginalized pregnant inmates and female offenders with young children living in communities (Murphey & Cooper, 2015; Swavola et al., 2016). CDCR's (2019) "In-Custody Female Population by Age" demographics and census data corroborate the above notion in that women of childbearing age encompass the top three age ranges of imprisoned women: 30-34 years (1,097), 25-29 (1,035), and 35-39 (915; p. 27). Likewise, CDCR's (2017) "In-Custody Population Average Age' for female offenders is 38.0 years (p. 12). CDCR's

demographics and census and data failed to indicate the county of commitment for each female offender before incarceration). However, the implications of CDCR's statistical data points revealed the majority of the in-custody female population are childbearing age. As such, these women warrant specific treatment to facilitate coping when their traumatic histories lead to entanglement in the criminal justice system.

Swavola et al. (2016) suggested that the lack of support from in-prison and community programs perpetuates negative views about female offenders and their children, leading to further destabilization and marginalization. Negative perspectives also lead to unfavorable practices employed by some prison staff and community members, who unwittingly retrigger the women by weakening their resolve to modify preprison behavior. Female offenders regularly contended with the stigma associated with incarceration as they sought supportive programming to address their criminal pathways (Swavola et al., 2016). Hence, a critical exploration of the provider's knowledge about the intersection between criminal activity and traumatic experiences involving female offenders warrants further consideration.

Inmate Mothers - Identity Salience and Desistance

Barnes and Stringer (2014) proposed that identity salience, with origins in identity prominence, described the emotional responses to self and social assessments relative to one's satisfactory performance in a given role (p. 6). Likewise, identity salience broadly explains the probability that one's primary identity becomes more pronounced for specific individuals across various settings, whether usual or unusual, such as a prison (Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Sharpe, 2015). Barnes and Stringer engaged 210 imprisoned mothers in a

research study, during which they reflected on their core nurturing attitudes and behaviors characterizing the central theme of their prominent identity. Barnes and Stringer asserted that identity salience helps female offenders own, arrange, and perform their identity as mothers. Moreover, Barnes and Stringer concluded that, although everyone performs multiple roles, female offenders with children identify more often with their primary role as mothers, despite their subordinate and incongruent identity as an offender.

Barnes and Stringer (2014) emphasized the importance of identity salience for inmate mothers by investigating maternal identity implication before, during, and upon release from prison. They posited that the offender's inability to perform their role as a mother or desist crime leads to frustration, diminished identity salience, and eventual role surrendering. However, when inmate mothers learned to recognize their mothering role as their most prominent identity, returning to a traditional motherhood role becomes less stressful, despite the stigma of a criminal past (Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Barrick et al., 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009).

Sharpe (2015) agreed with Barnes and Stringer (2014), suggesting that women desist from crime with their children in mind. In other words, identity salience for inmate mothers prompts them to assume the role of mother and protector. When female offenders adopt a protective parenting mode, they figured out the best way to help their children avoid the same negative scrutiny from interacting with the criminal justice system affecting them. Sharpe accentuated the distinction between identity salience and desistance for inmate mothers by suggesting that treatment providers incorporate specific

treatment needs into the offender's reentry programming. In anticipation of the release of more female offenders in California, researchers provided crucial insight into the best predictors of positive reunification and reentry outcomes for female offenders with children (see citation). Community-based service providers also played a role by strengthening the offender's connection to their mothering role, fostering positive behavior changes, and desistance from crime (Barnes & Stringer, 2014).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Murphey and Cooper (2015) defined adverse ACEs as traumatic events with lasting effects on the health and well-being of children of incarcerated parents. Not only does the incarceration of a parent cause accumulated adverse outcomes in the child's environment, but ACEs also increased the risk for trauma or exposure to toxic stress in children (Luther, 2016). Children often feel anxious and sad after losing an attachment figure, whether witnessing an arrest or learning about a parent's ongoing involvement in the criminal justice system (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Thus, the harm related to parental incarceration could multiply the existing and challenging circumstances of helpless children (Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

Luther (2016) and Murphey and Cooper (2015) suggested that ACEs contribute to maladaptive childhood social functioning, as exhibited by academic problems in school, abuse of illicit substances, mental and medical illnesses, aggression, and antisocial behaviors in various developmental areas. Murphey and Cooper (2015) also accentuated the connection between childhood physical and emotional health problems, such as "asthma, depression and anxiety, acting-out behaviors, grade retention, and stigma" and

parental incarceration (p. 3). Consequently, parental incarceration influences the manifestation of adverse outcomes and, coupled with the additional challenges in childhood (i.e., poverty and crime-ridden neighborhoods), intensifies the child's negative experiences.

All children learn different ways of coping with adversity, depending on the causative factors. When children experience parental incarceration, ACEs multiply incrementally (AECF, 2016; Cyphert, 2018; Dallaire et al., 2014; Luther, 2016; Sykes & Pettit, 2014). For example, the absence of an incarcerated parent becomes stronger when children feel hungry, lack the means to purchase basic needs, and friends and neighbors shun or treat them differently (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). As such, children resort to negative attention to coping with their adversarial circumstances by either acting out at home or in school, as manifested by antisocial behaviors, which increases their risk of future involvement in the criminal justice system (Luther, 2016). There is no other way to act when they have no parent to guide them. Children act out what they see depending on the ACE.

Dallaire et al. (2014) concurred with Luther (2016) regarding the link between parental incarceration and the indicators of children's maladaptive behaviors. In contrast to Luther, however, Dallaire et al. obtained direct input from 151 impacted children who explored their traumatic experiences with parental imprisonment. The children expressed their behavioral problems via individual interviews and the environmental risks associated with ACEs. Dallaire et al. found that children's incarceration-specific risks predicted internalizing (anxiety and depression) and externalizing (withdrawn and

unhappy) behavior problems. The research conducted by Dallaire et al. (2014) provided

valuable first-hand accounts about children's maternal and family incarceration

experiences to understand the multifaceted stressors better directly impacting them.

Therefore, when predicting internal and external risk with children with maladaptive

behaviors, the researcher needs to use the ACEs.

Impact of Parental Incarceration

Research conducted by Luther (2016), using the grounded theory framework and

involving 32 college students of incarcerated parents, demonstrated the adaptation of

prosocial identities as a coping mechanism to manage stigma. Luther described the

attribution of stigma to children due to parental incarceration as "courtesy stigma" and

their ability to cope as stigma management (p. 1265). Courtesy stigma links children to

the same category as their parents by default. In other words, stigma not only depicted the

parent with the *spoiled identity* (i.e., criminal behavior) but became displaced onto the

child impacted by the parent's illegal activity. Stigma management is a mechanism for

children to increase coping skills to address the trauma ensuing from parental

imprisonment. Luther (2016) correlated ACEs to parental incarceration identified the

process by which children separate themselves from and cope with their parent's spoiled

identities.

The National Survey of Children's Health reported that the United States

minimized the impact of parental incarceration on children while arresting their parents

(Murphey & Cooper, 2015; Manning, 2011). Murphey and Cooper (2015) recognized

that seven percent of the total population of children residing in the U.S., representing

well over five million, experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives. According to some studies, the imprisonment of at least one parent in a state or federal prison affected approximately two million or 1 in 28 children under 18 (Luther, 2016; Murphey & Cooper, 2015; Manning, 2011). Broken down by race, the imprisonment of a parent in the U.S. impacts 1 in 9 African American children (11.4%), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5%), and 1 in 57 white children (1.8%) (CDCR, 2017). Although research emphasized the mental and physiological suffering of children after a parent's incarceration, limited studies demonstrate definitive information about the impact of the parent's absence due to imprisonment from the child's perspective (Gordon, Hunter, & Campbell, 2018; Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2015).

In contrast to their Caucasian peers, African American and Hispanic children are seven and two times more likely, respectively, to have incarcerated parents (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016). Given the high percentage of single-parent families headed by justice-involved women in racially ethnic communities, the difficulty lies in identifying the specific issues impacting the children (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016; Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Nonetheless, current research suggested that racially ethnic children experience parental incarceration more often because of the prevalence of mass incarceration and the war on drugs, and the tendency of incarcerated adults to have multiple children (Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

Due to the large numbers of affected children, few government programs calculate the damage done and fail to respond appropriately to the specific risk factors impacting the child's overall well-being (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Public policy

debates ignore children's harm due to parental absence resulting from arrests and confinement, specifically racially ethnic children (Manning, 2011). In the U.S., African American children endured additional emotional harm and tended to experience considerable disruption and instability from parental incarceration (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Moreover, children with incarcerated mothers are more likely than those with incarcerated fathers to end up living with grandparents, family friends, foster care, and neighborhoods that lack support for families (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Research suggests the importance of developing interventions that examined the association between parental incarceration and consequences to the child during several developmental periods to mitigate the impact of trauma (Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

Kjellstrand (2017) suggested that arrest and incarceration is not the beginning of the social problems facing children and families but aggravates extant hardships. Family challenges such as poverty-level incomes and dysfunctional home environments worsened by parental substance abuse and other mental health problems create additional risks for children (Kjellstrand, 2017). Furthermore, living in disadvantaged neighborhoods and disorganized communities subject to violent crime intensified parental incarceration harmful impact (Kjellstrand, 2017; Murphey & Cooper, 2015). According to Kjellstrand (2017), developmental research during the past 20 years established that exposure to any of the adversities brought on by parental imprisonment leads to delinquency, depression, and substance abuse and increases the prospect of contrary outcomes for children.

Gender-Responsive Treatment

During the colonial and revolutionary periods (1607–1776), all offenders were considered equal (Vigessa, Bergseth, & Richardson Jens, 2016). Accordingly, correctional systems designed treatment protocols for all inmates, notwithstanding gender. Women received the same punishments as men (i.e., fines, public shaming in pillory and stocks, ducking stools, whipping, banishment, fines, letter wearing, branding, mutilation, and occasionally, execution) (Vigesaa et al., 2016). By the 19th-century, however, prison systems changed from punitive to more advanced practices (Vigesaa et al., 2016). Changes in prison practices led to incarceration instead of corporal punishment, with the primary focus of rehabilitating inmates based solely on criminal behavior (Roth, 2011).

In the late 1950s, however, Judge Marcus Kavanaugh depicted female offenders as "evil." He described their influence as "more insidious" and "her poison is as pervasive in the veins of a man's heart as that of a snake" in his book "The Criminal and His Allies" (as cited in Vigesaa et al., 2016). Accordingly, and for many years, prison officials eschewed the central prodromal social and environmental influences causing the justice-involved women's criminal activity (White, 2012).

The phrase "pathway-to-prison," coined by the feminist movement, incorporates the abuse and trauma endured by female offenders throughout their lives (Vigesaa et al., 2016; Saxena et al., 2014; Covington, 2008). While living under the stress and strain of abuse, women lacked the means to access the necessary treatment and services to improve oppressive levels of economic disadvantages, such as education, employment

and job training, substance abuse, mental health, medical treatment, and housing (Masson & Österman, 2017; Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher, 2014; Saxena et al., 2014; Covington, 2008). Historically, female offenders addressed and resolved pathway issues without assistance instead of seeking external support. In other words, they looked to themselves to find relief from personal trauma by using illicit substances or engaging in criminal activity (Barrick et al., 2014; Saxena et al., 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Covington, 2008). Hence, dysfunction bred more dysfunction and perpetuated the same problems that initiated the female offender's prison "pathway."

Covington (2008) suggested a different but more creative approach to curtail "pathway" issues in justice-involved women. Covington (2008) established gender-responsive/women-centered services "as the creation of an environment that reflects an understanding of women's and girl's lives and addresses their challenges and responds to their strengths" (p. 377-378). King (2017) asserted that GRT signified the development of effective evidence-based treatment programs for women and girls, while Saxena et al. (2014) emphasized the multiple theoretical and organizational contexts informing GRT's approach to helping women fully understand the reasons behind their criminal behavior and substance use. The development of GRT confirmed previous research documenting the higher prevalence of trauma exposure among women offenders (Saxena et al., 2014). Moreover, Covington (2008) suggested that social and environmental factors impacted all women, accounting for who they are and how they behave. Within the past 15 years, identifying one's gender as the foundation for resolving women's specialized needs led to an increased awareness in GRT.

Research shows that sexual and physical abuse trauma suffered during childhood created unique social markers for female offenders (Vigesaa et al., 2016). Saxena et al. (2014) and Covington (2008) reported that trauma and abuse histories link female offenders to substance addictions and, subsequently, involvement in the criminal justice system. Saxena et al. (2014) also suggested that justice-involved women demonstrated higher rates of substance use disorders than men with criminal histories. Moreover, research shows that female offenders are ten times as likely to become drug dependent than male offenders (Saxena et al., 2014). Hence, childhood traumas correlate to substance abuse in adulthood and illuminate specific indicators for female offenders (Vigesaa et al., 2016; Saxena et al., 2014).

Since the 1990s, the implementation of GRT strategies became instrumental in transforming the lives of justice-involved women by confronting and addressing past trauma (White, 2012). Segrave and Carlton (2013) promoted a contrary view of GRT's effectiveness, however. Segrave and Carlton (2013) posited that the creation of GRT strategies led to augmented correctional and community practices that unsuccessfully held women responsible for their criminal activity and imprisonment. The authors also suggested that prison-based gender-responsive programs increased imprisonment rates and failed to address the offender's specific reentry and economic needs, thereby adding to their disadvantage (Segrave & Carlton, 2013). The responsibility for the female offender's problem emanated from inside versus outside of the offender. In other words, the offender's criminality was self-actualized. In their final analysis, Segrave and Carlton (2013) argued against the provision of GRT in prison, emphasizing that gendered

treatment led to adverse outcomes (i.e., harsh sentencing laws and increased recidivism rates) by failing to address the post-release needs of female offenders (Segrave and Carlton, 2013).

Trauma-Informed Treatment

Research corroborated justice-involved women present with histories of abuse and struggle with the resulting in trauma. Levenson (2017) proposed that trauma manifested in persistent symptoms such as intrusive thoughts of an event, hyperarousal to stimuli in the environment, negative moods, and avoidance of trauma-related stimuli. Trauma-informed treatment serves to highlight an awareness of the occurrence and influence of early adversity on an individual's psychosocial functioning throughout their life (King, 2017; Levenson, 2017). Trauma-informed treatment also provides a fitting way to offer female offenders specialized services that acknowledge trauma and addresses lifelong maladaptive coping skills (King, 2017; Levenson, 2017).

Levenson (2017) proposed that trauma-informed care (TIC) reinforces a shared partnership based on the trust established between client and therapist. Beginning a therapeutic relationship often causes vulnerable feelings and resistance from clients, which interferes with the healing process. As such, clients with extensive histories of trauma become distrustful toward individuals charged with helping them overcome pervasive and enduring emotional problems. By developing physically and psychologically safe therapeutic environments, trauma-informed therapists improve awareness and increase empathy toward fragile clients while fostering trusting relationships (Levenson, 2017).

The influx of female offenders resulting from the mass incarceration phenomena beginning in the 1970s necessitated the development of specialized treatment to address past histories involving trauma and abuse. Swavola et al. (2016) stated that traditional treatment programs usually catered to male inmates. King (2017) and Swavola et al. pointed out that male-designed prisons (structurally and programmatically) limited the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions designed for female offenders. Programs designed for male offenders but administered to female offenders became ineffective, as well.

To counter gender-specific programming barriers, Levenson (2017) argued about the importance of integrating trauma-informed social work into different programs and across diverse settings. Infusing gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment contains two treatment interventions that focus on the female offender's individual needs (Saxena et al., 2014; Covington, 2008). Prisons comprise one such environment to facilitate posttraumatic growth in female offenders via the implementation of gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment (Levenson, 2017). Moreover, providing gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment versus gender-neutral or male-based treatment offers female offenders the safe space needed to delve into troubled pasts and build lifelong, healthy coping skills (Levenson, 2017).

Consequently, many have argued the importance of social workers to become more aware of the impact of trauma in their clients' lives, let alone the world around them. King (2017) and Levenson (2017) postulated that trauma-informed social workers incorporate core principles of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment and

deliver services in a manner that helps numerous clients avoid the pitfalls of trauma-induced interpersonal relationships, a common side-effect of trauma. Clients presenting with traumatic pasts expect trauma-informed social workers to utilize enhanced skills and strategies to help them address and resolve their trauma (King, 2017). Moreover, research suggests that practitioners with advanced skills and training should become more adept at developing strategies to help clients address trauma's complex issues (King, 2017).

Levenson (2017) emphasized the value of trauma-informed care as a promising option for clients to address and cope with childhood adversity. Levenson (2017) directed practitioners to view current problems as symptoms of maladaptive coping linked to trauma. Practitioners become enlightened about trauma-informed strategies and the influence of trauma on belief systems about the world (Levenson, 2017). Levenson (2017) also underscored the importance of combining trauma-informed therapy with existing models of evidence-based treatment and services. Furthermore, Levenson (2017) contended that social workers could deliver effective trauma-informed treatment to female offenders experiencing the trauma's damaging effects.

Similarly, King (2017) conducted a systematic search of electronic databases, collected numerous references, and communicated with experts to identify evidence-based trauma-informed treatment for justice-involved women. King (2017) identified manualized, trauma-informed strategies utilizing Seeking Safety, Helping Women Recover/Beyond Trauma, Esuba, and Beyond Violence to determine the outcomes of facilitated trauma-informed interventions for imprisoned women. King (2017) found that trauma-informed treatment strategies demonstrated a positive influence on the female

offender's ability to prevent continued aggression, which reduced or prevented recidivism by addressing the following: 1) connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; 2) the influence of families and other relationships, communities, and society on their lives; 3) the roles of anger and violence; 4) definitions of abuse and violence; 5) the link between violence and mental health and substance abuse (King, 2017). King (2017) also established the need for gender-responsive treatment. She found that targeted trauma-informed interventions aided in reducing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, as well as encouraging evidence about the overall usefulness of trauma-informed interventions in female offenders (King, 2017).

California Reunification and Re-Entry Services

The research confirmed the overwhelming challenges facing released female prisoners in the United States and all the resources needed to regain economic stability. While Buell (2014) reported several strategies to consider when working with justice-involved women, focusing on their role as mothers, Brown and Bloom (2009) pointed out the difficulties of assuming the mothering role while improving their financial circumstances, thereby satisfying the terms and conditions of parole. As such, the barriers of navigating multiple identities as an ex-female offender require "gendered" policies, programs, and system reforms to ensure seamless reintegration and successful reunification (Clone, & DeHart, 2014; Brown & Bloom, 2009) upon returning to Los Angeles County, California.

Carol Strickman, former Senior Staff Attorney at Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC) in San Francisco, detailed the reunification obstacles facing

incarcerated parents housed in California's female prisons. The LSPC organization

sought to promote the rights of incarcerated parents and their children through litigation,

legislative advocacy, and policy change (Strickman, 2017). Strickman (2017) advocated

for incarcerated parents' rights to maintain ongoing relationships with their children in

anticipation of their release and reunification. Unfortunately, outdated correctional

practices mandated inmates' punishment by removing them from society and their

families, while child welfare laws further restricted contact between inmates and their

children (Strickman, 2017). Strickman zealously pursued social justice through the legal

system to correct the apparent wrongs in California's archaic penal practices.

Strickman (2017) reviewed three California Department of Corrections and

Rehabilitation (CDCR) prison programs designed to transfer pregnant inmates or inmate

mothers into the community to participate in rehabilitative programming while residing at

home or in a community-based facility close to their children and family members. The

first program, called the Community Prisoner Mother Program (CPMP), established in

1980, offers comprehensive rehabilitative services to 24 female prisoners and their

children at an off-ground nursery. CDCR required strict eligibility requirements for

participants as follows: 1) the placement of pregnant offenders into the program before

delivery, 2) only non-violent or nonserious offenders could apply – extenuating case

factors necessitate additional reviews on a case-by-case basis, 3) women with child

abuse/endangerment charges, and 4) no participation by offenders with children over age

six ineligible for participation (i.e., sentence completion before children reach age six).

Female offenders become eligible for the CPMP after sentencing and transfer to state

prison. Upon assessing eligibility, offenders obtained an endorsement for participation, and the CDCR arranged the offender's transfer to the program.

The second program called the Family Foundations Program (FFP), opened in 1999 following the passage of new laws mandating prison reform in 1994 (Strickman, 2017). Strickman (2017) reported the FFP differed in one significant way from the CPMP, in that judges ordered participation of adjudicated female inmates housed in county jails into the program. The FFP offered drug treatment rather than comprehensive rehabilitation services to jail-diverted inmates while serving their remaining sentence. The inmate mothers served up to one year in the FFP, followed by one year of parole. Diversion to the FFP resulted in inmates serving less time than their sentences mandated (Strickman, 2017).

The Alternative Custody Program (ACP) enacted in 2010 and passed via Senate Bill 1266.31, offered the final alternative for non-serious and nonviolent female prisoners to receive early prison releases (Strickman, 2017). The ACP rules initially provided services to female offenders; however, another lawsuit changed the criteria to include male offenders, but not necessarily fathers of minor children (Strickman, 2017). CDCR officials granted the release of eligible participants to a community-based program or the offender's residence, relative, or friend. CDCR also granted suitable offenders up to two years in the community, before their actual release date, parole's subject to strict terms and conditions, including adherence to a curfew and the requirement to wear an electronic ankle monitoring device (Strickman, 2017).

Strickman (2017) wrote a scathing review of the programs mentioned above and established by CDCR. Strickman (2017) argued that instead of promoting family reunification, opportunities for parents to retain their parental rights, continuing to bond with their children, and reducing recidivism rates, CDCR's efforts negatively impacted prison realignment goals relative to community-based reunification programs.

Strickman (2017) decried the programs' unfavorable conditions, often located in rural areas and without public transportation access. She noted that the disciplinary tactics used to sanction the participants also negatively impacted their children. For example, when mothers lost privileges, so did children. Strickman (2017) also observed the racial and funding disparities between the CPMP and FFP; older buildings housed participants in the former program, whereas newer buildings housed participants in the FFP. Furthermore, the FFP participants tended to include more Caucasian than African American offenders. Despite the significant challenges brought about by incarceration, the positive aspects of these programs allowed parents valuable options to preserve their family units, such as the retention of parental rights and opportunities to care for their children, albeit in community-based programs instead of prisons and residences.

Conversely, research by Jedwab, Chatterjee, and Shaw (2018) focused on specific factors of a successful reunification plan, encompassing child safety and the provision of supportive services to parents. Jedwab et al. (2018) found that reunifying children with their birth parents forms the basis for the recommendations made by juvenile court judges and child welfare departments. For example, the parent's eagerness to resume parenting and a child's willingness to participate in the reunification process denotes potential

stability and the capacity to handle the associated stressors (Jedwab et al., 2018). Jedwab et al. (2018) also stressed the significance of customized programs that satisfied the combined needs during family reunification efforts. Unfortunately, many barriers beyond the control of child welfare and the juvenile courts' affect reunification decisions, including limited or a lack of community services.

Chambers et al. (2018) and Jedwab et al. (2018) excluded incarcerated parents; however, ex-offenders comprised the subjects of Clone and DeHart's (2014) research. Based on Clone and DeHart (2014), most caseworkers employ certain practices when helping clients achieve successful reunifications, such as 1) making sure children and parents desire the same reunification goals (Jedwab et al., 2018), 2) addressing the antecedent factors leading to separation, 3) including all parties in the process, 4) establishing a quality relationship between the caseworker and the family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017), and 5) offering support.

However, female offenders required many social supports to achieve successful reunification in light of their gendered needs and criminal histories (Barrick et al., 2014). Clone and DeHart (2014) found that 60 randomly sampled female inmates identified social support as the most important type of assistance while expressing concerns about prison experiences and expectations upon reentry. Their research addressed a gap in the literature ignoring the kind of support needed and described by female offenders' relative to reentering society after prison (Clone & DeHart, 2014). Conversely, research involving released male offenders evinced great promise for the type of reentry support men require (Clone & DeHart, 2014). Although Clone and DeHart (2014) highlighted the importance

of designing rehabilitation programs for incarcerated women's specific needs, the same efforts can inform practice and policy for ex-female offenders upon reentry.

The Maximizing Opportunities for Mothers to Succeed (MOMS) program offers a promising, gender-responsive treatment program in Alameda County, California, designed to meet and support incarcerated, pregnant, and parenting women sentenced to county jails and state prisons. Like the CPMP, FFP, and ACP mentioned above, the MOMS program is community-based and addresses the eligible female offenders' needs. McGrath (2012) reported that the MOMS programs' "It takes a village ..." approach links the women with case managers sensitive to their experiences. For example, case managers provide wide-ranging services to improve the economic status and independence of the participants. The purpose of case management services wraps around and link women and children to additional resources and community support (McGrath, 2012).

Critical to the success of released female offenders in Alameda County, California has the ability to obtain assistance from the MOMS program's three-phase process: prerelease, post-release treatment, and the reentry process (McGrath, 2012). The MOMS program, fully comprehensive in all aspects of service delivery, assisted offenders in achieving successful reentry (McGrath, 2012). The MOMS program's gender-specific and inclusive three-phase design addresses pathway issues, reentry concerns, and family reunification efforts (McGrath, 2012). Through participation in the MOMS program, the women addressed pathway struggles that often impede long-term and positive change (McGrath, 2012).

Barriers to Reunification and Re-Entry

Garcia & Ritter (2012) asserted that the female offender's high level of need warrants numerous services to lessen reentry barriers. Obstacles ran the gamut from the inability to obtain for medical and mental health care services, substance abuse treatment, and counseling to finding suitable housing and employment and accessing educational services (Johnson, 2014; Garcia & Ritter, 2012). Returning offenders also fear rejection from local, state, and federal agencies due to their legal status when asking for assistance. Unable to hold on to a meager existence, offenders often resume criminal activity as a means of survival.

Garcia and Ritter (2012) reported the post-incarceration policies through an examination of the impact of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) funded by the National Institutes of Justice (NIJ). The SVORI study found that females reported a significantly higher need for reentry services than men (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). Moreover, the study's findings demonstrated that despite the receipt of services, the SVORI participants showed only modest improvements, and their extraordinary level of need far outweighed the benefits received (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). Garcia & Ritter (2012) suggested that the SVORI study evinced two critical implications for California policymakers and practitioners in considering reentry services to female offenders relative to the level of service delivery: 1) address the individual's unique needs and 2) offer services within nine months of release.

The research demonstrated how criminal histories overwhelm and complicate ex-female offenders' economic challenges (Johnson, 2014). In a study comprised of women

on parole, Johnson (2014) agreed with Garcia and Ritter (2012) regarding the

employment obstacles facing ex-female offenders. Likewise, McGrath (2012)

emphasized the employment challenges of released female offenders in Alameda County,

California. Garcia and Ritter (2012) acknowledged that employment stands out as one of

the most significant reentry needs by 357 females (83%) sampled in 11 states and

returning to their communities. Furthermore, Johnson (2014) reported that female

parolees requested more guidance and assistance from their parole agents to improve

their employment chances instead of free services. Regardless of the documented need

for reentry services, female offenders received fewer services than men (Garcia and

Ritter, 2012).

Female offenders confronted numerous obstacles in their pursuit to reunify with

their children, as well. Encountering reunification difficulties is common for female

offenders. Countering this dilemma required economic success as it offers a compelling

incentive to help the women regain custody. The publication "Child Welfare Practice

with Families Affected by Parental Incarceration" issued by the Child Welfare

Information Gateway (CWIG, 2015) indicated numerous factors to increase reunification

chances for incarcerated parents. Aggravating factors prohibiting reunification include 1)

African-American heritage, 2) children with health, mental health, or behavioral

problems, 3) mentally ill, low education, or substance-abusing parents, 4) low

socioeconomic status, 5) limited foster placements, and 6) numerous out-of-home

placements for children (CWIG, 2015).

On the other hand, research indicated that children remain at home with parents able and willing to care for them (CWIG, 2015). Child welfare social workers usually recommended family reunification services in cases where parents prove financial stability (McGrath, 2012). Jedwab et al. (2018) asserted that equally important is the provision of ongoing family and individual therapy, substance abuse and other treatment, aftercare services, and parenting classes. Clearly, without supportive wraparound services to assist the family unit, reunification fails (McGrath, 2012; Jedwab et al., 2018).

Reunification services vary based on the type of services and resources available to incarcerated parents (CWIG, 2017). Agencies often deem ex-offender's ineligible for certain types of aid, such as cash benefits. Similarly, research suggests contradictory findings relative to the influence of specific case characteristics (i.e., ex-offenders) of families and children (CWIG, 2017). The research demonstrated that incarcerated parents and children are less likely to reunify without cash aid and other economic assistance (CWIG, 2017). The development of reunification programs and services is imperative to help children despite their parents' legal entanglements and improve access to economic support for fragile families.

Successful Reunification and Re-Entry

Covington and Bloom (2003) asked a simple question, "What works?" Covington and Bloom argued that the answer is alternatives to imprisonment. Although the solution works for nonviolent offenders, this option fails relative to serious and violent felons (Covington & Bloom, 2003). However, the Second Chance Act (SCA) signed into law in 2008, authorized federal agencies to award grants to state and local agencies and

nonprofit organizations to create programs, such as employment and housing assistance, substance abuse treatment, family programming, mentoring, victims support and other services for offenders reentering communities after completing jail and prison terms (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). The SCA supports positive reentry programming that improves outcomes for released offenders (Garcia & Ritter, 2012).

Clone and DeHart (2014) argued that emotional supports provide the best support when determining former inmates' success in the community. Emotional, instrumental, and informational guidance from family, friends, and other acquaintances, both professional and non-professional, comprised the type of social supports needed by ex-offenders (Clone & DeHart, 2014). Family members' social supports include caring for the offender's children or the church pastor providing free counseling. Undoubtedly, inmates require different forms of support to enhance their success in the community (Clone & DeHart, 2014).

Successful reentry and reunification also dictated the need to address desistance amongst female offenders in correctional settings (Miller et al., 2014). Miller et al. (2014) suggested that influencing change to imprisoned females by offering gender-responsive and trauma-informed care allows them to conceptualize better reentry strategies involving their lived experiences. Gordon, Hunter, and Campbell (2018) proposed that employing practice-based programming, such as enhanced/extended visits and parenting skills, improves the parent-child bond and supports reunification efforts. When unable to offer prison visits, the provision of family therapy, parenting classes, and other self-help groups deliver alternative interventions for female offenders planning for release and

reunification (Gordon et al., 2018). Furthermore, the ability to offer female offenders

assistance to desist crime decreased recidivism and the tendency to "start from scratch"

after subsequent prison stays (O'Brien & Young, 2006, p. 363).

Implementing gender-responsive and trauma-informed training for prison staff

and volunteers promote healing from trauma before inmates prepare for reentry and

reunification. Dallaire and Shlafer (2018) reviewed the published process and outcome

evaluation reports of parenting programs designed for incarcerated mothers. Dallaire and

Shlafer (2018) commended evidence-based programs and services for female offenders

that enhanced knowledge and increased coping skills while incarcerated. Dallaire and

Shlafer (2018) also suggested establishing partnerships with community-based volunteers

willing to facilitate self-help programs to aid rehabilitation and reentry.

Areas Requiring More Study

An extensive literature review was conducted to obtain insight into the nature of

this research study. Greenwood (2016) asserted that the corrections field limits testing of

cost-effective family-based approaches in light of the increased adult prison population.

Limited opportunities to determine the effectiveness of family-based treatment applies to

community settings, as well. The research suggested that family-based treatment, albeit

viewed as an innovative treatment concept, only works successfully with incarcerated

parents of younger children with whom they intend to reunify (Greenwood, 2016; White,

2012). However, eligible families must be functional instead of dysfunctional, and

treatment primarily promotes the reunification process (Greenwood, 2016).

Unfortunately, most female offenders suffering from past trauma resided within

dysfunctional households. These women still required therapeutic interventions to reduce the impact of their traumatic experiences. Conducting more research with female offenders at various stages of involvement in the criminal justice system validates community-based, gender-responsive treatment incorporating manualized trauma-informed interventions (White, 2012).

Few nationally recognized, evidence-based programs exist for female offenders, demanding the creation of additional programs to support their return to the community. Some research touted the provision of gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches for female offenders only while incarcerated (Western & Smith, 2018; Saxena et al., 2014; Covington, 2008), while other research endorsed the implementation of the same approaches in community-based programs (King, 2017; Levenson, 2017; Sanders, 2016; Vigesaa et al., 2016). However, in the process of delaying treatment reentering women often lack the requisite coping skills to help them learn coping skills when confronting economic barriers after release and the added responsibility of parenting children left behind. In general, female offenders required more research combining evidence-based treatment to address their specific needs.

Consequently, research covering female offenders' treatment established a link between gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches (Saxena et al., 2014). This literature review revealed a lack of consideration for combining both methods when offering female offenders reunification services. Moreover, researchers often neglected to indicate the educational level of service providers and, in some cases, any legal entanglement of the clients seeking reunification services (Jedwab et al., 2018). Although

social workers offer multifaceted services to clients experiencing trauma, so can other mental health professionals. However, future research exploring the effectiveness of gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment in conjunction with reunification services and implemented by social workers may provide more insight for practitioners in the field.

Summary

In conclusion, the literature review afforded insight into the specific challenges confronting CBSWs when providing reunification services to female offenders and their children post-release. The literature described the type of women impacted by mass incarceration, the kind of crimes they commit, and the inadvertent damage inflicted on the children they leave behind. The literature illuminated specific evidence-based interventions that address barriers to successful reintegration and increase quality-of-life outcomes and reunification efforts (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014). The literature also confirmed that released female offenders and their children require multiple services and resources to improve every aspect of their day-to-day functioning. Finally, the literature underscored the implications for female offenders who participate in gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment to reduce the long-term impact of trauma and improve coping skills.

Conversely, this literature review included an analysis of various California-based reentry programs that demonstrated proven successful outcomes with female offender populations. Regrettably, limited female offender reentry programs exist within the state. Likewise, the literature lacked insight into how certain cities obtain funding for reentry

program initiatives. Accordingly, advocating for the importance of community-based programs by interested individuals in local and state government offices created more programmatic opportunities to address the unique needs of released female offenders.

Finally, and most importantly, is contemplating the delivery of best practices through implementing gender-responsive and trauma-informed treatment when engaging female offenders returning to communities. Social workers understand that attending to female offenders require knowledge about their specific issues. Likewise, research demonstrated the importance of gender-responsive services for women suffering from adverse childhood events (Levenson, 2017). Therefore, essential to the CBSWs role, regardless of their work settings, is combining gender-responsive approaches with trauma-informed care when engaging released female offenders post-release.

This section concludes the literature review conducted to explore the social work practice problem related to the challenges entailed when providing ex-female offenders (with children) with reunification services post-release in Central Los Angeles, California. Section 2 describes the research design, data collection methodology, participants, instrumentation, data analysis, and ethical procedures for this study.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Section 1 presented the research for this Capstone Project linked to the literature review and methodology that explores the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing reunification services to female offenders with their children post-release in Central Los Angeles, California. Female offenders often commit nonviolent drug and property crimes; however, 80% of justice-involved women were primary caregivers to young children before incarceration (AECF, 2016; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Swavola et al., 2016; TSP, 2018). The added burden of parenting and experiences of abuse and trauma decreases the likelihood of successful reintegration (Saxena, 2014). Since few community-based reentry programs in Central Los Angeles, California address the unique treatment needs of female offenders (Covington, 2008; Saxena et al., 2014; Strickman, 2017), CBSWs play a critical role in developing and providing comprehensive services to support women's successful reentry (Reardon, 2017).

In Section 2 the research design and data collection process for this study, as well as the methodology, participants, instrumentation, data analysis, and ethical considerations will be presented. The summation of the data collection and analysis processes conclude this section.

Research Design

In the research study, I explored the specific barriers experienced by CBSWs when engaging ex-female offenders and their children in Central Los Angeles, California. Although some reentry service providers recognize the unique needs and diverse risks associated with the lived experiences of female offenders, other providers fail to do so

(Brown & Bloom, 2009). A group discussion involving CBSWs provided an opportunity to examine the extent of the practice problem and the offender's reentry needs. The practice-focused research question was "What are the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing family reunification services to female offenders postrelease?"

The principles of action research provided the conceptual framework of this study. Action research is an alternative or collective approach to a social investigation (Stringer, 2007). It also proposed that certain constructs or groups of people dictate the need for solutions to localized problems (Stringer, 2007). CBSWs participated in a group interview to address the identified practice problem through a collaborative inquiry process, culminating in developing an action plan. This plan of action modified and adapted current treatment interventions to fit the needs of ex-female offenders reunifying with their children in Central Los Angeles, California.

The inquiry process for this study involved CBSWs, employed by various agencies that provide child custody services to parents, some of whom are mothers and ex-female offenders released from California state prisons. McNiff and Whitehead (2010) suggested, "a small group of people" as focus group members are appropriate for generating the data used for making judgments and resolving a local problem (p. 101). Focus groups (n.d.) proposed the ideal size is five to eight, but no more than 10 participants. Still, the study's purpose and participant characteristics revealed clues about the group's proper size (see Focus groups, n.d.). Focus groups consisted of professionals with knowledge of the subject matter require fewer participants (Focus groups, n.d.). Since this study gained an in-depth understanding of a social work practice problem from

professionals in the field, the number of focus group participants remained within the ideal range of ten or less.

I sought to understand the extent of the practice problem viewed from the social worker's lens. Stringer (2007) asserted that participating in action research creates an atmosphere that promotes energy and enthusiasm among participant stakeholders. The three-step process of action research - looking, thinking, and acting - moved the participants through the process of inquiry regarding the phenomena of interest. I helped the CBSWs envision the three-step action research process as a road map toward resolving the problem (see Stringer, 2007). Engaging in the focus group encouraged a robust collaboration and fruitful exploration until the CBSWs reached a consensus about the reality of their situations. Moreover, the discussion inspired considerable insight and new knowledge about the social work practice problem, encouraging the development of a plan-of-action to improve reunification service delivery to ex-female offenders.

Methodology

The methodology for collecting data required the recruitment of five to 10 CBSW research participants for a focus group in Central Los Angeles, California. Often described as a group interview, focus groups offered the research facilitator a milieu to explore the social work practice problem by asking open-ended questions (Stringer, 2007). I designed the research questions to solicit answers that determined the CBSW's awareness and knowledge of the issues and obstacles involved in reunification services to female offenders with children. The questions also explored additional issues, including

trauma, economic conditions, access to community services, gender-responsive

treatment, and social worker skills and training.

Participants

CBSWs working in Central Los Angeles, California, were recruited for the focus

group through word-of-mouth inquiries and within web-based social media and

professional social work networks. I selected between five to ten CBSWs through

purposive sampling techniques. The study's selection criteria included social workers

who had earned a Master's degree with at least 1 year of experience with the population.

Purposive sampling is a nonprobability sample useful for studying a specific cultural

domain with subject-matter experts (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). I thoroughly reviewed

the list of potential participants acquired through purposive sampling, selected those with

employment experiences in the child welfare system, and contacted child-placing

agencies (foster family agencies), group homes, residential treatment, juvenile detention

facilities, and county jails.

After Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I contacted each

selected participant via email and telephone to inquire about their interest in the focus

group. After confirming interest, I sent an email an invitation, informed consent, and the

Focus Group Questionnaire (see Appendix) to read before the group convenes. Frequent

email and phone calls between myself and the potential participants confirmed their

participation in the focus group, time, and meeting place.

Stringer (2007) emphasized the inclusion of a diverse range of people in the

decision-making process to broaden the focus on improving overall service delivery in

other problem areas. This study is essential for research participants to provide direct services to incarcerated or released female offenders who are mothers. Additionally, each research participant must possess a Master's degree in social work from an accredited university or college and had various job titles including, but not limited to, children's social worker, social worker, social service practitioner, case manager, or therapist.

Instrumentation

The literature review formed the basis for creating open-ended and nonleading focus group questions. To collect data during the focus group interview, I formulated 11 questions intended to facilitate the participant's free exchange of experiences and viewpoints useful for clarifying the practice problem. The qualitative process of gathering information via open-ended and nonleading questions enhanced the exploration process (Stringer, 2007). It also reduced the researcher's tendency to taint the participant's perceptions (Stringer, 2007).

Beginning with general inquiries and graduating to more specific questions, I developed 11 focus group questions as follows: the first five questions queried participants about the needs and challenges of female offenders related to living conditions and their children; the sixth asked about the pressing concerns of female offenders; seven through nine asked about the awareness of the origins of trauma in female offenders and their children; the tenth queried their comfortability of current skill level needed to engage female offenders; eleven, the final question, solicited input about additional issues and challenges facing CBSWs in the provision of reunification services to female offenders with children post-release.

McNiff and Whitehead (2010) pointed out the dangers of using research tools that solicited unreliable responses and, instead, emphasized the formulation of appropriate questions that elicited responses anchored to the research. I designed my research instrument to seek viewpoints about the practice problem from professional social workers currently providing reunification services to ex-female offenders and their children. I began by asking questions that assessed their basic knowledge about the target population and the criminal justice system, then progressed to questions that gauged a deeper level of awareness about female offenders' needs relative to the practice problem. I used the Walden University Writing Center staff, professional contacts, and committee chairperson to review and revise the questions to ensure clarity.

I used the research instrument to solicit responses from the CBSWs during a 1 hour and 30 minutes focus group interview. McNiff and Whitehead (2010) asserted that group interviews produce rich data due to probing the participants during the process. The focus group generated a fruitful conversation about the participant's experiences with the practice problem. The group discussion also revealed other sources of critical information that broadens the understanding of the research problem. After the focus group interview, I clarified any ambiguous answers by contacting each focus group participant individually. Thus, I created questions that foster a discussion demonstrating the participant's observations of the problem, thereby decreasing the possibility of my dominion over their viewpoints.

Data Analysis

McNiff and Whitehead (2010) explained the data analysis process of action research to sort the collected information, look for and link themes, critically review the action taken, and theorizing practice implications relative to the research question. In this study, I carefully and accurately transcribed the recorded data and written notes to ensure the information collected. I then unitized the data, sorted the units into categories, and identified the categories and sub-categories into themes for analysis and interpretation (see Stringer, 2007).

McNiff and Whitehead (2010) suggested adopting a system to color-code the data. I organized the categories and subcategories by color on a Microsoft® Excel spreadsheet. A color-coded system provided a more precise method to identify the unitized data and sorted categories. I analyzed and summarized the data and notes collected from the group interview.

Following the focus group, I commenced the steps involved in the data analysis process, as suggested by Stringer (2007). First, I transcribed the collected data via a review of the digitally recorded and written interview notes. Second, I organized the data into logical units (words, phrases, or sentences) based on the participant's words and descriptions, not my assigned verbiage (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Stringer, 2007). Third, I identified categories and sorted into themes based on the participant's descriptions, experiences, and perceptions (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Stringer, 2007). Fourth, I reduced the categories, where necessary, into subcategories while analyzing and interpreting the data. For example, one category might be "general social work training";

a subcategory might be "specialized social work training" (Stringer, 2007). Finally, using

the color-coded Microsoft® Excel spreadsheet, I organized the categories and

subcategories to review related and significant themes, thus enabling the ability to clearly

and logically analyze, interpret, and summarize the collected data (Stringer, 2007).

Rigor in traditional research described a systematic process by which the

researcher proves the researcher's reliability (Stringer, 2007). Rigor in action research

speaks to the honest and authentic approach to inquiry by implementing specific steps

that warrant the researcher's trustworthiness and validity (Stringer, 2007). I ensured the

trustworthiness of this study by establishing credibility, transferability, and

confirmability.

Credibility

Essential to the action research process is the concept of credibility (Stringer,

2007). Anney (2014) posted that credibility established the research findings'

believability determined by the participants' original data and correctly interpreting the

participants' original views. I showed rigor by incorporating strategies such as prolonged

engagement, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling to demonstrate

this study's credibility.

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement improves the credibility of research as it offeres an

opportunity for the researcher to understand the underlying issues of the problem (Anney,

2014). A focus group provided the participants with an extended amount of time for

group members to become more mindful of the others' experiences and improved trust in

the research process and the researcher. Prolonged engagement also increased awareness of the participant's viewpoints regarding the problem, further developing trust amongst the participants and improved credibility.

Member Checking

Member checking is another strategy to ensure credibility in action research. The participants reviewed and verified the data and procedures to determine if the information and thoroughly represent their perspectives (see Stringer, 2007). Member checking is also useful for preventing mistakes in transcribing the raw data before writing the final report. When sending each member a copy of the raw data, analyses, and reports accumulated from the focus group for examination and clarification, they supported credibility (Stringer, 2007).

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing supports credibility by focusing on the emotional residue of the focus group process (Stringer, 2007). In other words, debriefing participants presents a unique opportunity to hear the emotional impact of the problem. Although the informed consent advised the participants about the potential for harm resulting from the research, each participant was given resources to counter any lingering emotional concerns resulting from participation in this study.

Transferability

Anney (2014) posited that transferability could transfer qualitative research results to other contexts and other respondents. In other words, transferability is the interpretive equivalent of generalizability (Anney, 2014, p. 277). I confirmed

transferability through a thick and rich or detailed description of the participant's accounts of their experiences and the research methodology (see Anney, 2014). I demonstrated the transferability of this study's findings by establishing that similar outcomes could be possible with released female offenders in other states predicated on the written report's data.

Thick and Rich Description

The researcher's ability to explain the entire research process, from determining the study's perspective and collecting data to complete the final report, substantiates evidence of thick and rich descriptions (Anney, 2014). Thick and rich descriptions also help other researchers replicate the study with similar individuals and conditions in different settings (Anney, 2014). However, careful consideration must be given to the researcher's capacity to reproduce the findings of a particular study (Stringer, 2007). I ensured this inquiry's transferability by collecting a thick and rich description from social work professionals' data during a focus group interview, which allowed a judgment about comparing this context with similar populations.

Confirmability

The ability to corroborate the results of an inquiry manifests the study's confirmability (Anney, 2014). An audit confirmed adherence to the research procedures by the researcher (Stringer, 2007). Per the audit trail, I established confirmability by keeping all field notes, collected data, digital recordings, and other objects associated with this study as evidence for review by the research participants and other interested individuals.

Audit Trail and Dependability

An audit of the materials used to collect data confirmed the study's veracity and accuracy and the effort to engage in the research process (Stringer, 2007). I used an audit trail to demonstrate that the research took place. The audit trail included the study's evidence, such as focus group and journal notes, digital recordings, and the questionnaire, for example. I used a password-protected computer to store written notes from the focus group discussion and collected data to ensure privacy. I verified the dependability of the study by following a systematic research process. I also demonstrated that the action research method's dependability was carried out by producing a detailed description of the procedures observed.

Reflexive Journaling

Another way to verify the study's confirmability is through reflexive journaling - the process by which the researcher retains written notes (Anney, 2014). The written notes were reviewed and refined for later use during the research process. Reflexivity offered the researcher an opportunity to appraise the participant's influence predicated on their background, perceptions, and interests in the qualitative research process (Anney, 2014). During this study, I kept notes of my thoughts and reflections in a confidential journal for review to counter the potential for personal biases.

Ethical Procedures

In adherence to their profession's Code of Ethics, social work researchers endeavor to conduct research with merit and integrity, promote community participation, respect participants' privacy, and honor diverse cultures and ethnicities (NASW, 2008).

The *Code* forms the predicate for the ethical conduct expected by social work researchers when engaging participants in the research process (NASW, 2008). The researcher's ethical comportment serves as a protective measure for the participants against questionable actions that may cause undue harm.

Walden University's Research Ethics and Review Process, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) adhered to strict guidelines embraced by the worldwide community of researchers that suggest the approval of research by a peer review board in compliance with the university's ethical standards, as well as U.S. federal regulations (Walden University, 2019). The IRB review offered objective feedback and approval regarding the study's risks and benefits and ensured that researchers are in full compliance with federal regulations (Walden University, 2019). The study was approved by the Walden University IRB, #05-15-20-0613643, on May 15, 2020.

Throughout this study, I maintained ethical research practices. I did not contact, solicit, or engage potential research participants in violation of the rules associated with IRB approval. I provided informed consent to the participants about the structure and expectations of the focus group before and at the start of the group interview. I reviewed the informed consent before the focus group interview. I also emphasized the informed consent section involving the goals, purposes, and process of the study and obtain written acknowledgment of the participant's willingness to engage in the research process (Stringer, 2007). Lastly, I informed the participants of the risk of harm inherent in the study and their right to refuse participation at any time.

Although the risk of harm to each participant involved in the study is minuscule, the possibility existed that responding to questions disclosed ethical concerns linked to their professional or agency practices. The probability also exists that agency administrators, supervisors, or colleagues could discover one of the participants' identities when reading the published study. To avoid the likelihood of participants' unmasking resulting from this research, thereby leading to the risk of professional retaliation or threat, as the research facilitator, I pledge to maintain the anonymity of each participant (Walden University, 2019). I read the rules before the start of the focus group, reiterating that none of the participant's identifying information would be made public or revealed without verbal and written consent and remind them of their right to refuse participation at any time (Stringer, 2007).

In this study, I maintained in a secure file in my home the information obtained from the focus group, whether expressed, written, or digitally recorded, and ensure the confidentiality of the participant's identities. Saving all written information on Microsoft® Word documents will be accomplished with a password-protected computer. Hard copies of any documents were scanned into password-protected electronic files and subsequently deleted; hard copies were shredded. Per Walden University's Research Ethics and Review Process, the storage of all materials from this study shall not exceed a period of five-years. This DSW Capstone Project also confirmed the confidentiality of the social work participants.

Summary

In conclusion, I used a focus group interview as data collection method regarding the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing family reunification services to female offenders post-release in Central Los Angeles, California. After IRB approval, I used purposive sampling to select master-level social workers with employment experiences in the child welfare system, contract child-placing agencies (foster family agencies), group homes, residential treatment, juvenile detention facilities, and county jails. In my role as the research facilitator, I demonstrated ethical behavior as mandated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (COE) related to conducting ethical research while reducing harm and protecting the confidentiality of research participants.

I began collecting data from CBSWs with the use of a research tool comprised of open-ended and non-leading questions during the focus group interview. I then analyzed, coded, and categorized the collected data to later separate by theme. I composed a summary of the study's findings, incorporating the perceptions, exact statements, and phrases of the research participants for their review. I also confirmed rigor by employing various procedures that establish the study's trustworthiness while simultaneously preserving ethical research practices. Lastly, I disseminated a copy of the final report to each research participant.

The following Section 3 discussed the introduction, recruitment, review of data, and member checking processes.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of the current research study involved exploring the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing family reunification services to female offenders post-release in Central Los Angeles. By understanding the social worker's experiences when providing family reunification services to female offenders' postrelease, the study participants focused on identifying issues and illuminating feasible solutions to reunification services in Central Los Angeles, California. The data was collected from a five-person study group via a private online video platform.

In the current study, the practice-focused research question was "What are the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing female offenders with reunification services postrelease in Central Los Angeles, California?" The organization of Section 3 included data analysis techniques used, study findings arranged by theme and subcategories, unexpected findings, and a summary.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data collection occurred on July 12, 2020, via a private online video platform. A single-focus group lasted approximately one hour with five Master's level social workers; four masters in social work/associate clinical social workers (MSW/ACSWs); and one licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). Each social worker confirmed either current or previous social work experience in Central Los Angeles with incarcerated females and their children. Subsequent data collection and contact with participants after the focus group occurred through email and by phone exchange.

Recruitment for this project began at the end of May 2020, after receiving Walden University IRB approval to conduct the study. Purposive sampling was used to locate viable candidates for the research group. Purposive sampling gathers a sampling population with common characteristics (Engel & Schutt, 2010). I contacted colleagues via web-based social media and professional networks for social workers online in the cities that make up Central Los Angeles County. The cities searched to find participants for this study encompassed Pico-Union and Arlington Heights in the south, Beverly Grove and West Hollywood on the West, Holly Hills and Los Feliz in the north, Silver Lake, Echo Park, Chinatown, and Downtown rounding up the east end. The social workers received an invitation to join the study. Five social workers responded with interest. I then contacted the interested social workers by email and a telephone call to ensure they met the eligibility criteria outlined in this study.

A copy of the consent form and focus group questions (see Appendix A) was mailed to each participant to allow them to review the focus group questions before the group. The email included a request for available times to meet for the focus group along with the informed consent and the focus group questions. All participants responded with a time and day best suited to their schedule. I confirmed the time, day, and location with each participant by email.

I transcribed the data. I started by organizing the transcribed data into basic categories. Content analysis was used to review the data for similarity in content, repetition, and frequency of occurrence, which lead to the formation of themes (see Bengtsson, 2016). Themes were formed by grouping together comments similar in nature

and scope. Similar comments frequently formed major themes while fewer occurring, supporting, or related words shaped subcategories under major themes. Key themes were grouped in their respective categories, while the remaining supportive themes or subcategories were grouped under the same category's primary themes. The study's data was sorted so that primary themes were color-coded to distinguish from the subcategories. Side margin coding of the participant's comments was added to exemplify specific subcategories.

Validation Procedures

In this action research study, validation procedures included a validation group, audit trail, member checking, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, triangulation, persistent observation, and reflexive journaling. McNiff and Whitehead (2010) posited that an action researcher needs to maintain and manage a rich data archive that can be generate strong evidence concerning identified criteria and standards. The current validation procedures were conducted throughout the data collection and analysis phases of this study.

Validation Group and Audit Trail

A validation group guided the current study to prove thoroughness or rigor throughout the research and data analysis processes. The validation group encompassed one Walden University supervising faculty, Chairperson, Dr. Meagher. My chairperson reviewed my transcript summary and provided useful feedback about the data analysis process. Data analysis included methods to help create the study's themes. I made further

edits to the manuscript after reviewing the sections and providing feedback and additional insights.

An audit trail supports a study's rigor by enabling observers to review the data collected (Stringer, 2007). In this case, an audit trail was created by capturing the recording of the interview and through notes, transcripts, and email exchanges. I used a password-protected computer to store the collected data to secure participant privacy and observe the researcher's ethical procedures.

Member Checking

In this study, member checking occurred when the participants were asked to review and correct the data. Stringer (2007) posited that member checking enables them to verify that the research adequately represents their perspectives and experiences. Anderson (2011) asserted that member checking could uncover inconsistencies and assumptions that question the data and its accuracy. The members and I used email exchanges to understand their comments and statements from the initial transcription. For example, one member thought I added a word that changed the meaning to that which was opposite of what he meant. The member subsequently asked for changes to his original transcribed statement that helped him understand his intended meaning. Member checking allowed the participant a chance to check the information he felt did not match his account.

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement improves the credibility of research as it offers an opportunity for the researcher to understand the underlying issues of the problem (Anney,

2014). A focus group provided the participants with an extended amount of time to become more mindful of others' experiences and improve trust in the research process and the researcher. Prolonged engagement also increased awareness of the participant's viewpoints regarding the problem, further developing trust amongst the participants, and improved credibility.

The focus group between the participants and me lasted approximately 1 hour. The discussion brought about a wealth of ideas and exchanges through a debate on the research study. Through follow-up and email, the prolonged engagement with the participants also persisted. I invited the members to contact me with any questions or comments and provided updates on the data analysis process. The follow-up created participants' opportunity to follow-up with additional questions or information not solicited during the focus group.

Through email, I asked them whether they had any questions regarding the data analysis process. The participants' responses made me realize the process was less complicated than I initially thought, as I did not want to put any pressure on them to answer in a way that would taint the data. Participant C had a comment stating, "Having the focus group (platform) is a great way to do that, so thank you for the opportunity!"

I asked another follow-up query of the social workers through email: What is an essential resource for the women (housing)? How long is programming? Who would fund it? I only received one answer: "Resources that are necessary include housing. Many individuals do not have the finances; therefore, may end up homeless, relapsing, and end up in jail once again" (Participant B).

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing occurs when the researcher provides people with opportunities to deal with emotions and feelings that might cloud their vision, inhibit their memories, or color their interpretations of events (Stringer, 2007). In this study, debriefing occurred immediately at the end of the focus group experience. The participants were asked questions related to the focus group experience process, including a statement that encouraged the verbalization of feelings. Debriefing focused on participant's perceptions when asked questions about what they meant at the end of the focus group.

During the debriefing, Participant D brought up an interesting situation regarding a client. The client initially felt disappointment over a problem but later was relieved when the outcome was decided in her favor. Participant D counseled the client regarding those issues and was reassured, as well. The client trusted him enough to work through her program and benefitted because the problem was found in her favor. Debriefing dispelled the participants' views about the negative way the client was viewed.

Triangulation

Stringer (2007) stated that including perspectives from different groups enables the inquirer to clear up the meaning to identify numerous ways the idea is perceived. Triangulation happens when focus groups incorporate their information - the triangulation information complements and challenges various outwardly derived sources such as observations and reports. I did not use triangulation as it was not warranted.

Persistent Observation

The observers' presence, being fully aware and taking notes of events during the scheduled focus group, enhances research credibility (Stringer, 2007). The credibility of the research was enhanced by circumstances and conditions during which I and participants were involved. During the focus group, I took notes and was visually aware of the participant's responses to asked questions.

Reflexive Journaling

Reflexive journaling is a writing practice that the researcher uses to keep a journal during the research process (Stringer, 2007). While writing reflexively about my research project, I started with comments and inserted them throughout the page, particularly next to words that would jog my memory. For example, in topics where I wrote a lot, notes next to the section would help me remember. I kept notes regarding the participant's names and pseudonyms, which served as markers to make notes. Finally, I wrote the information that would assist in organizing my thoughts relative to what I wrote. Next to keywords, like childhood trauma, I would write if it revealed childhood or adulthood trauma.

Problems Encountered During Data Collection

Two issues became apparent in the focus group transcription. They involved adding words that were not supposed to be in the focus group. For example, I wrote, "all the way up to kindergarten" in Participant B's transcript; in contrast, in Participant E's statement, I added "nontraditional versus traditional forms of just therapy which are Eurocentric." I noted the mistakes and corrections were made to the transcriptions.

The focus group lasted just shy of an hour, beginning at 2:05 PM and ending at 2:57 PM. All participants remained present for the full time, but Participant B provided background information and experience before exiting the group. She stayed for 48 minutes but agreed to be available by email and telephone if necessary.

Findings

This part of Section 3 showcases a demographic synopsis of the participants and problems encountered during the research study. The next portion of this chapter reviews the study's findings, research question, and unexpected findings.

I explored the research question related to issues and challenges facing (CBSWs when providing female offenders with reunification services post-release. Since the Central Los Angeles area is one of the most populous cities where female offenders return, it was essential to emphasize the site. After reviewing the data, a total of four major themes and six subcategories came through, reflecting the challenges common amongst social workers in Central Los Angeles, California. The main themes consisted of problems meeting basic needs (housing, employment, mental health services, education, and substance abuse), histories of trauma, need for specialized training, and difficulty navigating complex obstacles. Six subcategories comprising access to care, emotional regulation, trauma in children, parent-child interactive therapy (PCIT), trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TFCBT), believe the women, and reunification. The study's research question was "What are the issues and challenges faced by community-based social workers when providing family reunification services to female offenders' postrelease?"

Demographics of the Participants

I named each social worker alphabetically: Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, and Participant E. There were four Hispanic participants and one African American participant. There were three females and two males with an average age of 35. The participants have a native or long-standing residency in California but reported working in Central Los Angeles' neighboring cities.

The participants consisted of one licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and four Master's degree-trained social workers/associate clinical social workers (MSW/ACSW), all working toward licensure. Interestingly, only one of the participants, E, was employed by the Department of Children and Family Services as an emergency responder. The other four participants worked in various community-based family services programs with female offenders and their children. All social workers have experience working on some level with female offenders and their children.

The social workers have extensive experience working with Central Los Angeles County residents for approximately 13 years. Although their backgrounds are diverse, they all started working in some form or fashion with the target population. Their experiences range from a case manager, mental health clinician, clinical therapist, and therapist.

Participant A is a Hispanic female, unlicensed ACSW who works in a private facility. She has worked for about 1 year with female offenders in Central Los Angeles, California. She has experience with low-income families in the community. Now, she

works with clients connected to mothers in corrections. Participant A has worked in the capacity of a therapist.

Participant B is a Hispanic female, LCSW. She worked in community mental health for 3 years. Participant B currently works with male and female offenders in a correctional setting for 4 months. She has served female offenders for 4 months as a therapist.

Participant C is an African-American female, unlicensed ACSW who works for a nonprofit program for women in Los Angeles. The program caters to female offenders and their children. Participant C worked with women caring for their children in a prison program as they prepare for release. She worked for 2 years and provides treatment services as a clinical therapist.

Participant D is an African American/Hispanic male, unlicensed ACSW currently in an agency setting. Before working for his current employer, he worked in an agency setting providing services to children, some of whom had incarcerated parents. Participant D serves those needing case management services for approximately 4 years.

Participant E is a Hispanic male, unlicensed ACSW who worked for in public social work office. He provided services in an emergency room for children. Participant E reported working with abused and neglected children brought to the emergency room by relative caregivers or social workers. Prior, he served for 4 years as a mentor/counselor working with foster youth in a community college setting.

Listed below are the study's major themes and subcategories:

Table 1

Major Themes and Subcategories

Major Themes	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4
	Problems Meeting Basic Needs (Housing, Employment, MH and Education Services, & Substance Abuse Services)	**Histories of Trauma**	**Need for Specialized Training**	**Difficulty Navigating Complex Issues**
Subthemes	Access to Care	Emotional Regulation	Parent-Child Interactive Training (PCIT)/Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT)	Believe the Women
		Trauma in Children		Reunification

Major Theme 1: Problems Meeting Basic Needs

Participants identified the idea of basic needs as major themes that answers the first question: What are the issues and challenges facing community-based social workers when providing female offenders with reunification services postrelease. The major themes comprised the subject matter that female offenders require, so their lives mimic a sort of normalcy. Normalcy refers to the social norms in society, such as three meals a day and a place to live. The focus group participants discussed several ways for female offenders to solve their problems when seeking basic needs in the community. Additionally, the participants identified the importance of female offenders using to use suggested community resources.

Housing

Participants identified housing as one of the primary unmet basic needs for female offenders. Participant E stated, "Yeah, I would have to say stable housing…". Participant B told the group, "I would have to say the needs include housing…". Participant A stated that "the needs would be…affordable housing, especially in California…". Based on the participant's responses, female offenders should be connected with stable housing.

Employment

Although housing was most important, the social workers agreed that one could not get a decent home without work. Therefore, the second basic need is employment. Participant D said, "I would say employment is directly entangled with lack of education for a lot of our ladies." "That also plays a part in job skills...making sure that they have that training, the whole interviewing process." Participant E emphasizes that "employment tends to give people a sense of self-worth," which gives "a greater opportunity to get successful employment that can only help to reintegrate [people] back into society and get back involved with their children." Some social workers view ex-offenders as people to help through the rough times.

Mental Health Services

Third, under the list of basic needs, are mental health services. "They're being paroled into the family environment [and] for a lot of times mental health is not addressed," said Participant C. The social workers suggested it makes sense to manage their clients from the beginning to the end to ensure their total well-being. The female offenders prepared themselves to live in the perceived chaos, which bridges the gap

between prison and society. Participant A believed "the needs would be mental health services." "…which would result in the consistency of those services."

Education Services

Fourth, under basic needs, are education services. Participant C extends that point a little bit farther to education from school. Most inmates will need to continue educational services upon release; in contrast, some are well prepared for the "free world" when released from prison, knowing that they have completed GEDs and higher degrees of education.

Substance Abuse Treatment

Fifth, under basic needs are substance abuse treatment. Participant C posited that "The specific challenges that our female parolees have experienced that kind of led to their incarceration is really important." Participant B emphatically shared, "I would say the needs include access to resources such as…substance abuse treatment if they have a history of that." Essential treatment for female offenders could be substance abuse treatment. Participant C considered substance abuse treatment as significant.

Access to Care

Although the social workers stressed a significant need for housing, employment, mental health, education, and substance abuse treatment, female offenders feel the pain of not connecting to the services mentioned above. Consequently, "some things need to be set in place or organizations where all of the services can come to them" (Participant D). For example, Participant B replied, "I would say some of the challenges include the access to the resources which is like financial support or even like transportation to those

resources." However, Participant B summed this question up when she said, "I just think access to care to help these individuals, support and readjust[ing] to their roles." "They have greater opportunity to get some successful employment that can only help them to reintegrate back into society and get back involved with their children" (Participant E). Participant D states, female offenders "…need a guide that goes with them and teaches them…" "You can't give them resources and just think that they're gonna do it." "It's overwhelming for them."

Major Theme 2: Histories of Trauma

The participants posited that ex-female offenders' trauma lacks awareness of their personal histories of trauma. For example, Participant A suggested that "depression, anxiety, and PTSD can result from the unacknowledged trauma that female offenders went through as a child." Participants identified trauma as an essential issue to address. Participant A noted that female offenders have experienced "…a lot of trauma[tic] issues…[from] domestic violence to any other trauma…now victims have become the offenders…[to others or] with their children." Participant D suggests trauma is "…seen a lot…[for example] sexual and physical abuse, domestic violence, childhood neglect, traumatic grief, victims of kidnapping, human trafficking…that they didn't even know that they had.

Emotional Regulation

Children act out their behavior, and when they get older, if their conduct does not resolve, they continue exhibiting the behavior. Participant C asserted that she "thinks children are now starting to reenact some of the behavioral challenges that their

mothers or their parents had displayed…" Participant D stated, "A lot of youth display more; they could either go to violent behavior or like they have issues with emotional regulation a lot." Participant C asserted, "Now they've learned behavior, and they're reacting with some of those same learned behaviors."

Trauma in Children

Participants identified trauma displayed in children of female offenders. Trauma in children is exhibited via an inability to "…focus in school, verbalized suicidal ideation, self-harming behaviors, and depression" stated Participant A. Participant A further stated children of female offenders "…may engage in risky behavior such as substance use, unprotected sex, violence, PTSD, and abuse by parents or people they were placed with after their mother was incarcerated." Participant B asserts children are caught in the "continuing cycle" of trauma. Participant C says, "…children now are starting to reenact [trauma] that their mothers had displayed, and now they continue [with] anger, verbal, and physical aggression towards others." Children's trauma results in a "…kinda domino effect of the trauma that they experienced."

Major Theme 3: Need for Specialized Training

Participants in the focus group reported that social workers need "more training." Additional trainings are specialized to help social workers learn appropriate therapeutic skills for the specific client population. Participant E stated, "More training on improving social skills to better team [collaborate] with these parents, to better engage, connect, more active listening to become more compassionate...more trauma-informed training…", which could according to Participant A, "help[s] them receive access to the

different programs/resources available." Participant A further stated social workers need training "…on how to provide these services while also being trauma-informed." For example, Participant B identified Parent-Child Interactive Therapy (PCIT) and Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT) as two effective treatment programs.

Parent-Child Interactive Therapy (PCIT)

Participant B stated, "PCIT is a parent training treatment for young children with emotional and behavioral disorders." PCIT is evidence-based and emphasizes improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and changing parent-child interaction patterns. Participant B also stated PCIT is "…an intervention to help that mom rebuild that attachment and how to respond to that child." Participant C asserted the "PCIT approach is really crucial…for the adults and the children."

Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT)

Another training program identified by participants was TFCBT. Participant B posited, "[TFCBT] is a treatment developed for use with teenagers who have experienced one or more traumatic events. Meeting with the teen and caregiver about the same component gives the therapist time to teach the skills to support the teen at home and for the caretaker to process their feelings about the trauma." Participant C stated the "TFCBT approach…is really crucial for the adults and children."

Major Theme 4: Difficulty Navigating Complex Issues

The participants discussed various challenges that social workers face when providing post-release family reunification services for their female offenders with children. Participant A stated, "…the large caseloads that CBSWs have…really decreases

the time that…families have…to receive the services…when needed." Participant B

suggested, "…the access to care to help these individuals…contact…their treatment team

to meet their needs" is not available. Participant C asserts, "One of the biggest and

probably never-ending challenges is just the need for additional resources and funding."

"Female offenders must be aware of their rights and the resources with different

programs specifically focused on incarcerated women," stated Participant E. Participant

D expressed, social workers "…need to help mothers actually interact" with child

welfare. Participant C highlighted the need for "policy changes" that would help female

offenders as soon as they are paroled to "hit the ground running."

Believe the Women

Participant E asserts that "Having significant relationships with folks that believe

in these mothers … providing them with a sense of…motivation to deal with the daily

life stressors… helps them navigate all the obstacles that they have to go through to be

successful." He also posits, "Having them do the ACEs scores and having them

understand like, hey, your behaviors, they weren't the best, but here's the reason why it

was easy for you to be impulsive because - you had all this trauma." In essence,

participants argued that relating to the female offenders personally puts them at ease,

lowers their barriers, and allows them to open up, so social workers can heal their trauma.

Reunification

Participants spoke about the challenge of navigating obstacles for reunification,

such as trust issues with the system and family, connecting with support groups, financial

support, and asking for help. Participant C states that "family is not always a healthy,

seamless support, so it does create a lot of trust issues" when reentering the community. "They're already dealing with a lot of frustrations on their own," cited Participant C. "They don't have the inclement stability or financial support to…get the child's need[s] met or anything else for that matter", which could "continue her path in reentering the system," added Participant B. Additionally, Participant B suggested that the needs of female offenders and their children "…are like peer support" or require access to "…mentor[s] to remind folks that they're going to be alright as they continue to stay focused, continue to express their stress".

Unexpected Findings

In the focus group meeting, I discovered unexpected findings, which included a focus on self-care. Self-care encompasses the need to take care of oneself, which helps the female offender "navigate through stressful situations," post-release, as Participant E stated. The inability of female offenders to care for their personal needs puts their child's needs at risk. Participant E suggested, "The importance of self-care, so they're able to alleviate stress and become more resilient and build those skills…" that would support positive coping skills for the children. In addition, Participant E asserted that the need for self-care "…taught me the importance of learning and moving more towards culturally-relevant intervention as opposed to non-traditional forms of…therapy which are very Eurocentric".

Summary

The current section reviews the practice problem by major themes. The study's practice problem involves the challenges facing social workers who provide reunification

services for female offenders' post-release in Central Los Angeles County, California. The following section discussed the impact of the social work practice problem on the literature review and the study's key theoretical concepts.

The focus group explored the participants' perceptions of the research question. There were four major themes and six sub-categories discovered during the coding process. These themes included: problems meeting basic needs, histories of trauma, need for specialized training, and additional challenges. Participants suggested that community-based social workers could improve the issues and challenges faced when providing family reunification services to female offenders' post-release by doing the following: acknowledging the differences these women present and the difficulties of trauma inherent in the population. In this way, the women are provided individualized treatment - no matter who and where they are - to address trauma issues in reunification.

Section 4 of this study concluded this project and encompassed the application for professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, and implications for social change.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of the current research study was to gain some understanding of the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing family reunification services to ex-female offenders' post-release in Central Los Angeles, California. The awareness of CBSWs problems during the family reunification process can be improved to create social work practice that could minimize obstacles when reunifying families.

The problems that female offenders experience when working with CBSWs in Central Los Angeles were identified as challenges that influence practice and therefore, can provide possible solutions for reunification issues. I used purposive sampling as the recruiting method for five social workers, working in some form or fashion with the target population. All five participants possessed a social work degree and held the title of therapist, case manager, or children's emergency room worker.

Key findings suggested that study participants perceive a lack of awareness with meeting basic needs (housing, employment, mental health, education, and substance abuse services), histories of trauma, specialized training, and difficulty navigating complex issues. Study participants also suggested that housing, employment, mental health, education, and substance abuse services are essential for female offenders. Second, study participants indicated that female offenders struggle with coping with their traumatic histories – all kinds of trauma. Third, study participants felt the need for women to access all services. Finally, study participants thought the women are most in need of someone with whom they could develop trusting relationships. These findings are important to inform social work practice. Based on these findings female offenders

and their children should participate in enhanced programs that would support

reunification with their families.

The proceeding section includes reviewing the findings for application for

professional ethics in social work practice and specific social work practice

recommendations. The section concludes with a review of how the results can promote

positive social change.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

In the following section of this paper, I discuss the social work practice problem

and its relation to the NASW Code of Ethics. First, the two principles from the code are

presented and useful for services designated for female offenders. Second, I discuss how

the code guides micro social work practice for female offenders. Finally, I explain how

research findings impact social work practice regarding professional ethics.

The NASW Code of Ethics provides a guideline to the social worker's practice in

this area of focus (NASW, 2017). The code is divided into two sections: (a) values and

principals and (b) standards. Related to this study, I discuss two values regarding female

offenders' social work practice problems: (a) social justice and (b) dignity and worth of

the person (see NASW, 2017). These principles allow social workers to pursue social

change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and

groups of people, treat clients in a caring and respectful fashion, and become mindful of

individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity (NASW, 2017). Valuing the

individual differences in client populations aligns with the pursuit of social justice.

The inability of social workers to value personal preferences and choices results in futile client engagement and advocacy ((NASW, 2017). Working with ex-female offenders in the community requires attention to and awareness of their unique treatment needs. The examination of potential issues and barriers facing community-based social workers during the provision of reunification services to female offenders and their children postrelease expounds on this problem. Also, providing direction to social workers about female offenders' lived experiences improves awareness and humanizes them as part of the larger society (NASW, 2017).

Based on the study's findings I sought to impact social work practice by pinpointing what female offenders and their children need. As discovered by the CBSWs, female offenders need housing to stabilize their situations and ground them. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process and seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals (NASW, 2017). Housing is a service that fosters this behavior in women and comprises a core value for social workers to exemplify the profession's code of ethics. When engaging women through the helping process, outside of prison with their children and in their home, CBSWs can help them maintain and restore their lives homes.

The study's outcomes are significant in developing solutions identified previously under Major Theme 1, such as a need for housing, employment, and mental health services. Challenges that prevent social workers from assisting female offenders in regaining custody of their children when released from prison in Central Los Angeles

start before entering the criminal justice system and persist throughout the female

offender's life. It is incumbent upon the CBSWs to seek services that address the female

offenders' specific problems. Once CBSWs receive the female offenders after release,

they can better manage the services provided.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

This section discusses two action steps for CBSWs in Central Los Angeles,

California, when providing reunification services for postrelease female offenders. A

recommendation based on the study's findings is to increase focused support services by

following these two action steps:

- Monthly meetings with Central Los Angeles, California stakeholders at
  the Incarcerated Parents Work Group (IPWG) to identify a consolidated
  list of ten new support services that focus on Major Theme 1 for female
  offenders and their children.

- Once the 10 new support services are agreed upon by the IPWG, the list
  will be distributed for CBSW use via the monthly newsletter and updated
  as needed.

Study participants suggested that support services are vital for female offenders

and their children. Moreover, the recognition for improved services in Central Los

Angeles, related to an absence of specific city and state resources, inhibit the CBSWs'

ability to provide critical community services for female offenders and their children.

CBSWs should collaborate with community stakeholders to develop resources that would

target specific reunification needs. These action steps provide CBSWs with a possible solution that respects and integrates Major Theme 1 from the study participant findings.

Impact on Personal Social Work Practice

The findings from this study impact my social work practice by granting me a deeper understanding and connection with the CBSWs and their reunification responsibilities within the community before releasing female offenders. Previously, I worked in the position of supervising psychiatric social workers. I managed five individuals at four prisons who offered care and coordination of services to female offenders for preparation for release to their CBSWs. Working with female offenders showcases the devastating effects of trauma on their children, such as psychological and mental health problems.

The findings obtained from this research also allowed me an understanding of the challenge-related gaps in services when female offenders get released to their CBSWs. The realization that increased support services are needed to ensure reunification challenges would be addressed was essential. The implications would result in specific lists of support services that could be utilized to help them transition, timely reunify, and provide the needed care for their children. Additionally, advancing healthy working relationships among the Family Services Program at the California Institution for Women and CBSWs would promote collaborative relationships and effective communication, thereby creating better female offender reunification services.

Transferability to Clinical Social Work Practice

The study's transferability to clinical social work practice applies to the CBSWs in Central Los Angeles, California. Greater diversity among participants may have provided alternative perspectives on the challenges experienced by social workers. Also, there were no disabled or older social workers who could have granted themselves the challenges of Central Los Angeles more differently. The current study cannot be generalized. However, it may contribute to valuable insight into issues facing social workers in Central Los Angeles County or may be used to develop future research studies that examine specific problems found in this study's results.

Findings and the Broader Field of Social Work Practice

According to the data, key findings suggest a potential impact on the macro level of social work practice. The study's findings indicate that there should be policy amendments for funding to enhance family reunification. Child welfare offices should safeguard their services and make sure to organize and prioritize this type of relationship. The study participants discussed a need for increased support services to specifically help female offenders and their children reunify expediently. The immediate reunification of the female offenders with their children supports stability, which leads to better outcomes.

CBSWs should include a prerelease practice that requires them to preliminarily share a list of current specific support services with the prison clinical social worker to better support the postrelease process for reunification services. For example, after reviewing the female offenders' children visits documentation, the prison clinical social

worker and the CBSW would discuss and identify current post-release support services necessary to effect reunification. In this case, it would allow early collaboration between the CBSW and the prison clinical social worker to prepare female offenders for productive reunification. Productive reunification leads to permanency.

Working with female offenders may be difficult and tiring. Study participants opined they often have limited trust in their female offenders to productively re-enter society because they do not follow the terms and conditions of their parole program. Moreover, CBSWs may not trust postrelease female offenders as they would nonoffender families because they believe incarceration makes female offenders more susceptible to reincarceration. Thus, study participants feel that CBSWs should continue to adopt practices to increase support services in the local community that benefits families and aid the reunification process.

Specialized Training

Based on this study, practitioners argued that specialized training is essential to their success. Two training programs are (PCIT and TFCBT (CWIG, 2017). PCIT is an intervention to help the mother build the attachment and respond to the child; TFCBT helps the child deal with the mother's separation and helps the mother overcome traumatic experiences. Social workers refer families to PCIT and TFCBT providers in their communities. Social workers ensure that mothers and children get linked to vitally needed therapeutic services upon release from prison and provide their kids with the skills they need at the time. Participants discussed that the current interventions serve as a foundation for reunification rather than out-of-home placements. Plus, participants agreed

that ensuring mothers have the most necessary tools in their toolbox leads to less future

maltreatment.

Limitations

The study's limitations include external validity, demographics of participants,

and feedback from participants. Purposive sampling was used, which could have

provoked the selection prejudice of participants. Out of 58 counties in the state of

California, only one was chosen to recruit volunteers. Of the numerous children's social

workers within California, participants were selected using specific criteria, including

possession of a social work degree and experience working with female offenders and

their children post-release. Five participants engaged in a focus group: three identified as

Hispanic, one as African-American/Hispanic, and one individual as African American;

there were two males and three females in the study. A larger sampling size would have

allowed for greater exploration and broader perspectives about the challenges faced by

social workers in providing services. Thus, the sampling size was due to time constraints

and resource limitations needed to conduct a broader study. Factors such as scheduling

conflicts, personal circumstances, disinterest in the study, and not meeting the study's

participation criteria were some of the reasons given for social workers not participating

in the study.

The final limitation of the study dealt with the shortage of feedback from

participants. I came across issues receiving feedback from participants after transcribing

the data. All five participants reported that the transcribed focus group appeared to be

correct during the member checking process. However, only four of the five participants

responded to additional questions. After the third round of further questions, only one

participant responded. The participants addressed the social problem and research to

satisfaction.

Recommendation for Further Research Grounded in Strengths and Limitations

CBSWs in Central Los Angeles, California, have issues and challenges that relate

to the need for providing adequate support services for the post-release reunification of

female offenders and their children. Consequently, future research in this study should

focus on the most effective post-release support services related to housing, employment,

and mental health counseling that would ensure reunification in a timely manner for

female offenders and their children. Presently, CBSWs have identified specific holes in

the current support services available for the post-release female offenders, which cause

significant delays in the reunification process. The following are further

recommendations for future research:

1) Conduct a study of NASW members related to the most needed support services

   for post-release female offenders.

2) Conduct a study of the members of the NASW - California related to the most

   needed support services for post-release female offenders.

3) Conduct a study of NASW – California related to pre-release communication and

   collaboration.

4) Conduct a study of post-release female offenders to self-determine personal

   needs for support.

Additionally, it is critical that we CBSWs consider creative personalized approaches for identifying post-release female offender needs that are comprehensive and specialized. Personalizing the approaches would increase the reunification process and decrease recidivism.

Finally, CBSWs believe the case manager should talk to the client (CWIG, 2017). No one knows better than the client what they need and how they need it. Future research could involve the allowance of CBSWs to oversee post-release female offenders to choose the services, referrals, or resources for their families. Talking to the clients could ensure reunification services happen with children.

Dissemination of Information

The researcher could share the doctoral study information in two different ways. The first dissemination would confer findings with the agency to provide awareness of current issues perceived by the workers. The second dissemination of results would be at the next Florida chapter of the National Association of Social Workers conference. A poster will be created and displayed during the conference to present the results.

<p align="center">Implications for Social Change</p>

The data acquired in this document's information could affect social work practice at the micro-, mezzo-, macro-level. Social work practice through the micro level could be improved by enhancing the family reunification processes used by CBSWs. These efforts can start during in-prison visits with the CBSWs using a private online video platform for pre-release meetings with female offenders. CBSWs could advance their practice via the information received from the female offenders at the pre-release

meetings. Increasing the communication between the CBSWs and the female offenders provides a more personalized approach when using support services for the reunification process. Subsequently, the increased use of a more personalized approach could enhance overall communication between community stakeholders. Moreover, the micro level impact, Central Los Angeles, could have a positive influence on the entire city of Los Angeles, the mezzo level. For example, the utilization of a more personalized approach by CBSWs at the micro level would decrease the chance for recidivism for all levels.

CBSWs maintain their status of support in local neighborhoods and communities on a mezzo level. The study participants debated their vigilance in engagement skills, trust-building, and learning more about treatment. The study participants admitted that social workers are professional and focused on verbalizing positive perceptions in their practice. They accomplished this by exhibiting professional behaviors and respect towards their clients. The CBSWs shied away from damaging trust with their clients because some clients believe social workers are unethical or unqualified. CBSWs must consider client's perceptions to ensure trust and maintain their reputation.

On a macro level, the current research addresses the need for policy change to safely increase reunification for female offenders with their children (CWIG, 2017). Advocacy that is necessary for change could challenge existing policies. This study seeks effective solutions that enhance valuable social work services. As such, the implications for improvement to policies suggest CBSWs need to gain access to efficient support services that will provide appropriate client resources. This study's possible importance

for social change could sway the focus of family reunification services from general support services to personalized support services.

Summary

In conclusion, this action research project served to explore the issues and challenges facing CBSWs when providing reunification services to released female offenders with children in Central Los Angeles, California. The focus group discussed four major themes and subcategories: problems meeting basic needs, histories of trauma, need for specialized training, and difficulty navigating complex issues. Understanding the issues and challenges that confront CBSWs when providing reunification services ensures the reunification process would occur on time. As licensed CBSWs, we must be quick to address any barriers in serving our clients and meet such obstacles with creativity, good motives, and unwavering determination to call attention to policies that are not helpful for our clients or our professional practice. CBSWs need the full backing of our communities and stakeholders.

It is recommended that CBSWs have access to support services that they can personalize to meet the unique needs of their female offenders, which would improve the reunification process. If family reunification were improved, female offenders would be less likely to go back to prison. Children of incarcerated parents that obtain reunification services rather than languishing in foster care deserve a blank page in our nation's great storybook - and the chance to shape their part of the tale as it continues to unfold for themselves, their future families, and our whole country (AECF, 2016). CBSWs can right this wrong at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Specialized training is another recommendation for the critical success of CBSWs. PCIT and TFCBT are instrumental interventions for female offenders to help them build rapport and lessen the impact of their traumatic experiences. Without these services in the community, female offenders would not have the skills to respond appropriately to their children. On the other hand, implanting PCIT and TFCBT regularly into treatment programs aids female offenders in worthwhile efforts to improve their child's well-being.

Ultimately, providing the CBSWs with enhanced support services is critical and ensures that a successful reunification is achieved. Part of those support services is therapeutic in nature. Within the therapeutic parameters, CBSWs' can engage their clients by trusting and listening to the female offenders, who feel their voices are being heard. When the women trust and listen to the CBSWs, they have more successful reunification with their children. Achieving a successful reunification process also links directly to positive outcomes. Consequently, CBSWs are essential for providing the focused support services that female offenders require to reunify with their children. This impacts positive social change in that supporting these women helps them become good mothers, avoid incarceration, and improved members of the community.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about the needs and challenges of female offenders post-release and their children?

2. How are the needs and challenges related to housing for female offenders post-release and their children?

3. Tell me how the needs and challenges relate to employment for female offenders post-release and their children?

4. How do the needs of childcare relate to female offenders post-release and their children?

5. Can you tell me the needs and challenges of family relationships of female offenders post-release and their children?

6. What do you feel are the most pressing concerns for female offenders post-release and their children?

7. What kinds of trauma do you see displayed by the female offenders post-release?

8. What kinds of trauma do you see displayed in the children of female offenders post-release?

9. How has this increased your understanding of the origins and impact of trauma on female offenders?

10. What specialized skills or training do you feel CBSWs require to better equip them to assist female offenders with the reunification process?

11. Are there any additional issues or challenges facing CBSWs providing reunification services to female offenders with children post-release?